A NEW NOTE

BY

ELLA Mac-MAHON

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UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

A Few Press Opinions on

A New Note

World

"The latest book of which people are talking; this new book is very much up to date."

Daily Telegraph

"The book is really a remarkable one, of high literary quality, replete with strong human interest and displaying masterly ability. Widespread popularity awaits 'A New Note.' Ere long everybody who is anybody will read it."

St. James's Gazette

"Eminently readable, and we should say will be read. The writing is brisk and clever, and the character-drawing very good."

Manchester Guardian

"Its merits are far above the average, the characters are admirably drawn, they are living people and stand out in solid relief amid the shadowy unsubstantial hosts that people the pages of most modern fiction. The authoress has knowledge of the human heart. There is much cleverness and power in the book."

Saturday Review

"A promising story; the verdict on this must be decidedly favorable."

Guardian

"It is of an uncommon power and breadth, rare and vivacious humor. Its incidents and *mise-en-scene* are decidedly fresh, and the conversations brisk and to the point."

St. Paul's

"Shows much knowledge of character and skill in portraiture. There is scarcely a character that we might not single out for praise; the dialogue, too, is excellent—smart without being flippant, and witty without being labored."

A Few Press Opinions on 'A New Note'—*Continued*

Athenæum

"This cleverly written novel. . . . The book is written with considerable alertness of style, and the sketches of the old maiden aunt and half a dozen other minor characters are touched off with no little skill and humor."

Post

"Its crisply rounded phrases, bright dialogues, and general knowledge of the world, might be envied by many a practised writer. The book is a novelty in the best sense of the term, vivacious and refined."

Academy

"The note in the book is struck well, and with a purpose—delicate insight into shades of feeling and certain hold of human nature. The characters the author has made her own she has made a distinct success."

Post

"Combines adequate knowledge of the world with a high degree of literary skill. The character of the heroine is admirably conceived and managed. The situations are powerful without effort, and the dialogue is often as brilliant as the reflections are shrewd. This is one of the novels of the season."

Times

"It introduces to the novel reading public a writer of no mean powers. A story of human interest, thoroughly bright and wholesome. The heroine is a new conception. Every reader of the book will readily recognise the genuine gifts of the author."

Speaker

"There is undoubted ability in 'A New Note.' The author is clever and can write well; she can also draw accurate sketches of the better side of social life."

Globe

"The author displays a feeling for character, skill in dealing with the crises and events, and a pleasant style."

Mail

"A clever bit of literary work, well conceived and admirably developed. The heroine is that extraordinary latter-day creation, 'a new woman.'"

A NEW NOTE



The clock had struck seven before Victoria lowered her violin.
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BY

ELLA MACMAHON

AUTHOR OF

"A MODERN MAN," "A PITIFUL PASSION," ETC

ILLUSTRATED BY

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A New Note

A NEW NOTE.

CHAPTER I.

Two people were walking in the avenue of beeches. The beeches at Eastaston formed an aisle, nearly a mile in length from end to end. The two people were about mid-way in the aisle. The mellow sunshine of October swept slantwise through the trees, and lay across the soft brown carpet of leaves beneath their feet. The two, a man and a woman, walked on slowly.

"So it is to be in November, after all?" said the man.

"Yes, the end of November; Joachim thinks I am quite ready."

"And your father has given his consent?"

"My father has given his consent."

There was silence.

The father of the girl was a prominent politician, and the consent that he had given was that his daughter might forthwith enter upon the career of a professional violinist.

The man drew in his breath sharply. The girl's gaze went straight onwards in serene contemplation

of the golden lights streaking and emblazoning the trellis of beech leaves. After a moment or two the man turned and glanced at her face. It was worth a man's while to look at, though it was not pretty. Intellect, in a woman's face, shunts prettiness aside very imperiously. This girl's face was keenly intellectual, otherwise it might, possibly, have attained to prettiness. The features were very delicate, very clear cut, just a little sarcastic. The complexion was pale, a pure intense pallor. The mouth was exceedingly delicate, but on the whole firm, and the lurking sarcasm lingered about the lips. At her age, however,—she was just five-and-twenty,—time and circumstance had not yet definitely carved out the lines of the mouth. Much would depend as to their ultimate direction upon how time and circumstance might use its owner. A cloud of soft, very dark hair, dexterously and becomingly crimped and curled, came low down on her brow, over her eyes. The latter were peculiar. Dark, and, at first sight, bright and somewhat imperious, at second sight it might be seen that they were dreamy, intent, luminous, rather than brilliant. Further, that in the small dark iris something of the strenuous *listening* gaze shone deeply, recalling the eyes of Beethoven in the portraits familiar to most people.

The girl's whole personality was intensely strenuous; her small fragile figure was quick with energy and strong purpose. The picture of her were incomplete were it not added that in every line, and attitude, and gesture she revealed the indefinable but unmistakable quality which is called distinction, emphasized by extreme care and good taste in the arrangement of her clothing and of all the appur-

tenances thereto. As she walked on now, not a woman of her acquaintance but would have envied the admirable simplicity of her brown suit of home-spun tweed, the perfection of its cut, and fit, and finish, down to the exact arrangement of the buttons on the sleeves. Moreover, as she was unaffectedly vain of her feet, she wore her skirts, in the country, as short as possible, so that the nattiness of her little thick-soled brown shoes and smart gaiters might have satisfactory display.

The man who looked down at her had no especial distinctiveness of appearance, other than that he was unmistakably a gentleman. He was broadly built, and well made, and his face, which was fair and ruddy in hue, was much sunburnt. It was a good *straight* face, very indicative of the character of its owner. He was an Irishman, a quiet silent man. There *are* quiet silent Irishmen. Yet his voice first broke the silence now.

"Victoria!" His companion started perceptibly. She knew what was coming: "But if he will he will," she said to herself with an inward laugh; "it is always the way." "Victoria,"—he spoke slowly, and she was conscious of irritation,—"you know as well as I do my feelings for you."

The girl made a gesture of deprecation.

"Oh yes, you do. Of course I am not your equal at all as regards brains and cleverness, and all that; we're simply not in the same street; but, after all, a girl like you" (his eyes fastened again on the delicate profile) "is absolutely certain to make men want to marry you; and look here, darling Victoria, I should do everything you liked. You'd be fifty times freer, if you married me." His voice was very quiet; nobody,

hearing it, could have told that every pulse in him was throbbing as he touched his fate. "You see"—she let him go on, resolved to allow him to say all he had to say—"You see, I know all about your Art, and your ambition, and you could fire away at the fiddling as much as ever you liked. I'm sure you'll make yourself famous one of these days. I don't like any of their fiddle-playing as much as yours."

The dreaminess went out of the girl's dark eyes, and mirth flashed up. Being an Irishman, she thought, he probably knows "God save the Queen" from "St. Patrick's Day in the Morning."

"But" (her attention was brought back to his words) "all that need not prevent your marrying me. It's not as if we were poor people. On the contrary, you can devote yourself to Art without bothering about money; and I shall be there, you know, just to take care of you, and to—to help you out. Do, do, listen to me, Victoria!"

"I am listening," said Victoria, "most attentively."

"Then you will?" His voice and his face grew eager; he came a little closer.

The girl stood still. With her walking-stick she poked round holes in the carpet of leaves as she spoke.

"It is so hopeless," she said, "to try to make you understand." She spoke rapidly, with a peculiarly clear and refined intonation. "But the fact is, you are altogether *outside* my feelings. To me the whole worth of life is my career. It is, to me, as a career in politics, or law, or soldiering is to a man. Marriage is so unnecessary, so needless for me."

"But a man," said the man, "may have a career,

and yet may wish for marriage as well." He thought this argument a deadly missile.

His companion smiled indulgently.

"True, quite true, but the cases are not the same. A man married is as free as air, practically, so far as his career is concerned; but a woman,—no, her career is closed. Oh yes, I know what you would say about the great women, writers, and artists, and musicians, who have been married women, but it's a mistake for all that. The fact still remains that, whatever chance a woman may have who marries after her career is assured and her triumph *made*, to marry before it is fatal."

"Well, then, when your career is assured may I come back and marry you?"

"No, no, I didn't say *that*," was the quick response; "how you do catch one up! I was merely speaking *generally*. Individually, my tastes are not matrimonial; you ought to know that by this time."

He ought, and he did. He had known her from childhood. He had been at Eton with her eldest brother, and he was nearly ten years her senior. But his was a strongly persistent nature. Slow, silent, self-contained natures often are.

"I love you, Victoria—no, don't frown, for I have a right to say so, at any rate, and I would take any risk. Of course, if you think some chap who was cleverer would suit you better, I suppose there's no more to be said. Only, let him be the greatest man on earth in point of brains and all that, he could not love you better than I do."

The cold, delicate girl's face softened. The sarcasm almost died out of it.

"You are ten thousand times too good for me

Jerry; but believe me, brains, as you call it, has nothing to do with this. On the contrary, I wouldn't marry a man with brains for all the world. No mistake could possibly be more disastrous. Men with brains have tempers, and are querky. *I* have a temper, and *I* am querky—result——"

She spread out her hands significantly, and laughed.

"Clever women," she added plaintively, "*will* make that mistake. Clever men never do. They invariably fall in love with simpletons. They are perfectly wise."

"They are," returned the man stolidly, "and I wish you'd fall in love with me."

The girl laughed again.

"Love—love, how you harp on that same old string!"

(Yet she was an artist; possibly something more.)

"Some day you will harp on it yourself, Victoria, and then——"

"Then," she finished imperturbably, "I shall have an opportunity of judging if it be really so charming to the ear, and so difficult to reduce to the level of common harmonies, as is generally supposed."

He threw back his head with a gesture of immovable patience.

"Then it is to be Art only, Victoria?"

"It is to be Art only," she repeated gravely. "You are very dear and good, Jerry, and a real friend, but marriage——"

She lifted her eyebrows unmistakably.

"Let us walk on," she resumed more briskly, "it must be getting towards tea-time."

"Half-past four," said the man quietly; "just wait a minute."

She put her stick to the ground firmly, and waited.

"Victoria,"—his face paled a little,—"just, as it's good-bye, may I kiss you? *only* once, I swear it."

Her brows contracted quickly.

"Oh, no, Jerry. Don't be silly and boyish."

"It would do you no harm," he pleaded.

"It would do me no good, nor you either. My dear boy, *do* come on; we shall be perfectly late for tea."

He walked up to the house without another word.

But just in the portico he said once more,—

"Look here, Victoria; remember, if at any time you should think better of it, or chuck up Art, or *anything*, just let me know. I'll do anything you wish, and I'll never change."

She only smiled and nodded and ran off.

* * * * *

"Man," reflected the young lady, as she took off her hat, and carefully studied the re-arrangement of her hair in the looking-glass, "man is still a primitive creature; he has not yet got over the conviction that woman is created only to be made love to."

Her hair being satisfactory, she went down to tea.

CHAPTER II.

TEA during the autumn was always in the inner hall. The latter was also known as the "Gibbons Room," because of some apocryphal carved wainscoting attributed to Grinling Gibbons,—although, as the master of the house always said, Grinling Gibbons had no more to do with carving it than he had. The master of the house was standing now by the fireplace. He was talking to the man from whom his daughter Victoria had lately parted in the portico. Nobody looking in this man's face would have gathered from it that the hopes of years had for him just been finally extinguished.

FitzGerald Annesley, or, as his friends called him, Jerry Annesley, did not wear his feelings on his sleeve, or in his face, for kind friends to analyse.

He was talking now—to be more accurate he was listening while Victoria's father talked—about the value of mangold-wurzel as reliable dietary for fed beasts. Victoria came in just at this moment, and her father glanced across at her. His eyes met her dark ones with the glance of one to another between whom there is a good deal of confidence. The likeness between father and daughter was sufficiently marked to be noticeable. But the man's personality had not, in anything like an equal degree, the energy or strenuousness which distinguished that of his daughter. People said of the Right Hon. George

Leathley, M.P., that he might have been a great man in his own line—which was politics—only that he was too lazy and too good-humoured to take the trouble. His appearance perhaps in no small measure bore this out. In appearance, indeed, this prominent politician—for such he was in spite of laziness and good-humour—bore an acknowledged resemblance to one of the most admired and most admirable actors of the present day: a resemblance to which, perhaps, a certain humorous twist about his well-cut lips not a little contributed. As he continued the mangold-wurzel discussion his eyes followed his youngest daughter's movements. The younger man's eyes avoided her.

Victoria steered her way to the tea-table, at which her eldest brother's wife was presiding. She got a cup of tea and a little chunk of hot buttered toast, and she proceeded to drink her tea and eat her toast in comparative solitude and complete silence, poised alone on a corner of the oak settle. A magnificent black cat, who wore a red leather collar, rose from a long-haired rug, stretched his lordly length in refreshing *abandon*, and seated himself presently close against her feet.

William the Conqueror was the cat's name. He was also known in the family as "Victoria's familiar spirit."

Victoria's eyes looked misty and serious and abstracted. Nor was she apparently conscious that William the Conqueror had started elaborate toilet operations in his comfortable retreat against her skirts.

Two people, who were watching her from a far corner of the hall, concluded that she was enjoying

one of the flights of mental fancy or imagination to which persons of artistic inclinations are supposed to be prone at odd moments. As a matter of fact, she was thinking that the hot buttered toast was not hot but cold, and wondering vaguely how long her sister-in-law would be likely to submit to that sort of thing.

"Look at Victoria and William the Conqueror," said one of the two people who were watching her. The speaker was a young man, and the person addressed was a very young girl with fair crinkly hair. The owner of the crinkly hair laughed a little.

"How funny it sounds, doesn't it—Victoria and William the Conqueror?"

"Eh? Oh, by Jove, yes, I suppose it does. I wonder if that was why they called him William the Conqueror."

His companion did not seem to hear.

"How *distraite* your cousin looks."

The young man put up his eyeglass.

"Music hath charms, you know," he said, with rather an indulgent smile. He spoke to his companion as if he thought her young. She did not appear to resent it, although she was young—in every respect.

"The artistic temperament," he resumed, "is not understanded of the people. It demands too much, and your ordinary people of the world, especially of *our* world, don't like any demand which exceeds what they are willing to give. Now no ordinary world, constructed on the principles of this one, could satisfy the true artistic temperament, and the true artistic temperament takes jolly good care to let the world

know as much. And the world is like the old fairy godmother of the fables: accept her gifts, and she loads you with more or less valuable or valueless continuance of her goodwill; but refuse and despise her, and she soon makes her castigation felt. The world is the real fairy godmother, capricious, imperious, good-natured to a certain degree, but intolerant of any question of her absolute supremacy."

He paused and smiled. The rounding off of that sentence pleased him. He thought of how well it would look in print. At the present time his thoughts generally tended towards print. It also pleased him to see that the young girl, to whom he was, in his own opinion, good-naturedly devoting his pearls of wisdom and epigram, was regarding him with quite evident admiration and respect. As he paused, it struck her that it was required of her to say something, but a certain haziness of perception as to the remark or remarks needful kept her silent, no less than the fear of seeming ridiculous in the eyes of her companion.

"I simply won't make a fool of myself," she said inwardly.

It might have consoled her had she known that her companion was not at all inclined to despise her. On the contrary, his opinion of her perceptive powers was rising higher. She evidently appreciated him, and, now that he looked at it, her crinkly hair was really very pretty, and admirably dressed. He began again to scatter more jewels of wisdom and epigram, but with a sudden change of outlook which added to his companion's mystification.

"But I tell you what, the tyranny of the artistic temperament is a distinct bore. Upon my word, it is

one of the most distinct bores just now. Every little Tom, Dick, or Harry, Dolly or Kate, who likes listening to classical music, or enjoys the Lyceum Theatre, or goes to Switzerland in the Long Vacation and comes home raving of the Riffel Alp, or even gets sentimental when there's a full moon, and tells one that everything 'jars,' and they don't think there can be much hope for this world, and no hope at all of any other,—all these little boys and girls" (the speaker was barely thirty) "pose and *im*pose their 'artistic temperament' for the benefit of suffering society."

He paused again, because as he uttered the last two words it flashed upon him that they would look admirably effective at the top of a column—"Suffering Society," neat and alliterative, he said to himself.

"Ye—es," said his auditor tentatively; but her well-meant expression of due and comprehensive interest was not necessary, because the speaker needed only free scope for the full flow of his paragraphs. They were indeed only spoken paragraphs. Already his mind's eye had set them in type. The obedient admiration which sat in silence beside him was all that was wanted. The obedient admiration was a good deal mystified, but perhaps that was no great drawback, for, from the beginning of time, and in all probability to the end of time too, mystification will always convey to the ordinary mind a sense of vague power behind it.

"The fact is, one sees a lot of the other side of the artistic temperament, the shady side, in my trade." His voice when he said "my trade" would have made any of his friends smile. For he was very

much in love with his "trade." Perhaps that was one reason why, although he had been several days in the same house with his present companion, he had only just perceived the charm of her crinkly hair.

"Oh," struck in the latter, who now began to see daylight, "it must be so nice to be a journalist, and see all sorts of people, and know everything, especially to hear everything long before anybody else."

He smiled beamingly, and dropped his eye-glass. A more adroit speech could scarcely have been uttered, for in spite of epigrams he was an ingenuous boy, and he longed with an exceeding great longing for somebody to tell him that he was a man of note. As a matter of fact, he was a peer's son, but he believed himself to be a journalist, and the dream of his life, so far, was one day to edit a big London "Daily." The dreams of one's life do not as a rule make themselves realities, but his dream at any rate did him no harm, but rather good, since it kept him a good deal out of the mischief which peers' sons of nine-and-twenty find generally ready to hand.

"Well, you know," he said, leaning his elbows on his knees and looking up at her with quite an affectionate smile, "I'm only at the start,—at least, I mean I only belong to one branch,—subleaders, you know, and some sorts of political articles and literary articles, and whipped-up social sketches and studies. The chief seems to catch on to these, he says I have a turn that way; but of course it's only, as I say, one branch. Still, they pay me, you know, two guineas a column,—regular thing, you know, and that's not bad at the start."

He always took care to mention the payment,

because he considered that that showed the ding-dong reality of his pretensions. It cleared him from the suspicions of amateurishness. Nothing hurt him so deeply as to be for a moment looked upon as an amateur.

"How *nice*!" said his companion, with a nod of her fair head.

"Well, it's a pretty hard grind. Specially the shorthand. Shorthand is the most beastly stuff to get round. But you're quite out of it without shorthand. Besides, I should never get a 'special,' you see, unless I can report."

"But would you really like to go to places like—like those men one sees at tables taking down speeches and things? They never look very nice,—I mean the men,—not quite clean, you know."

"Oh, but *that* sort of shorthand reporting is the lowest rung of the ladder."

His companion had no knowledge of any of the rungs of the ladder in question, but she looked as if she quite believed it.

"At the same time, some of the biggest swells have begun that way."

"No, really? Have they? But they aren't really gentlemen, reporters, are they?"

"Every one is a gentleman nowadays; but—well, they are not the sort of men for you to get talking to—or anything like that. My object in learning shorthand is to get a big correspondency one of these days. That brings one to the front a lot, you know. Besides, it's a simply ripping experience; but then, one must be well up in shorthand."

"And how do you get up shorthand?"

"Oh, I have a chap coaching me, a first-rate chap.

He seems to think I've rather a turn for it. Curiously enough, he himself, though he's a *nailer* at shorthand, could no more write three consecutive lines of decent English than he could fly. Odd, isn't it? Poor beggar! he'll never do more than earn a bare livelihood by reporting."

"I think," said his companion, and she blushed a little, which made her look very pretty, "I think it must be so awfully nice to be—clever and—and—all that. Now, your cousin, for instance, I think it is perfectly wonderful of her to—to——"

"To take up that line?"

She nodded, and he laughed slightly.

"Well, I think it is even more perfectly wonderful that she should be allowed. Of course the world is coming on a good bit; still, a man like my uncle doesn't as a rule care to see his daughter going out to evening parties at ten pounds a night."

"But she won't do that, surely?"

"Well, no, not exactly," and he laughed again at his companion's widely-opened eyes; "but she's going in for the whole business thoroughly, and if I know Victoria Leathley she'll stick at nothing—nothing that will make her a big success."

"She will be famous, won't she?"

"Well, I don't know. Joachim thinks a lot of her playing, or says he does—*I* don't. It's a daring thing to say, of course, in the face of Joachim, but—we'll see."

"I do admire her so immensely." She just glanced over at Victoria as she spoke.

"Hum! well, she's not pretty, you know, but she's undeniably distinguished-looking, and she is enormously clever. Look here, you people don't know *how*

clever she is. As to her own people, her father is the only one who has the faintest glimmering of what Victoria really is. Of course the others are proud enough of her music and her talents, and her general power of picking herself out from the ruck, or at all events they pretend to be proud, but they no more understand her than they understand the other side of the moon's surface."

"How strange!"

"Do you think so? Probably it would be stranger if they did," added this young man, who occasionally had flashes of insight. "Now—hullo! shall I put down your cup?"

CHAPTER III.

"ADA," said Victoria to the girl with the fair crinkly hair, whose name was Ada Barclay, "I am going upstairs now to practise. Do you think you would care to come too?"

"Oh, yes; I *should*, awfully."

Victoria smiled.

"Well, come along then," she said quickly. She passed her hand as she said it through the other girl's arm; "we sha'n't have so *very* much time before dinner."

Ada Barclay went off at once. She was a young person possessed as yet of considerable capacity for enthusiasm. At this time Victoria Leathley was awakening a good deal of the latter.

The two girls ran up the turret stairs very quickly to Victoria's room.

Victoria and her father inhabited that portion of the house known as the turret. The latter was not a turret. It was a nondescript excrescence in bricks and mortar tacked on to the south-west angle of the house. It owed its existence to Victoria's great-grandfather, and embodied a style of architecture for which no known architect had ever been able to find a name. The word "turret" was, at all events, as applicable to it as any other. If the turret at Eastaston was an architectural monstrosity *per se*, no less than as an addition to a solid Jacobean

house, it had an excuse for its existence in the fact that it contained one or two of the most charming rooms in the house.

Victoria's own beloved study, or music-room—for it was as much one as the other; she called it the "den" herself—was a room which the architect, whoever he may have been, had possibly desired should be an octagon in shape. It was not an octagon in fact, because it had only six decided sides to it, though there were two undecided ones to make the whole effect more peculiar than symmetrical. The peculiarity was further accentuated by the windows being set in the two undecided sides. The windows were heavily mullioned and somewhat embayed, thereby providing space for the cosy window-seats, whence the inhabitant could overlook a wide stretch of green, undulating pasture. The windows, and the ceiling, which was diapered, were the best features of the room.

One of the wide latticed panes stood open when Victoria and Miss Barclay entered. Fresh air, Victoria said, was one of her manias; she liked to live in a hurricane, was how her family put it. Now, however, Victoria shut the window and poked the fire.

Ada Barclay, meantime, stood looking out. She was watching the flush of the western sky, where the remains of a red sunset still lingered. The points of the firs in the new plantation stood up against the horizon like so many spear-heads of burnished gold from the reflex of the dying sun.

Victoria came behind the younger girl.

"What a glorious sky!" she said; "but how short

the days are growing. I shall have to light the candles."

She turned away as she spoke and lighted the candles on either side of the violin stand. When this was done the effect in the room was curious. The struggle between the light within and the light from without flung strange shadows up and down. Victoria, with her violin under her left arm, stood in the oasis of candlelight arranging some music on the upright stand. Apart from the space lighted by the candles, the remainder of the room seemed dimmer by contrast, but not too dim to have shown an onlooker that it harmonised well with its owner. It had indeed grown with and around its owner, and expressed her convictions as to what a room of the kind should be.

Its decorative attributes expressed four component parts—books, pictures, music, and flowers; upon these its decoration depended, not upon screens and hangings and rugs. Screens and hangings and rugs were not, in Victoria's estimation, decoration, but furniture. They had their place accordingly, as such. In like manner, if the other pieces of furniture, the corner bookcases, for example, and Victoria's writing-table, were beautiful bits of Sheraton's work, they never for a moment conveyed to the mind any idea other than that they were there because of their usefulness. They were beautiful, certainly, because beauty is lovely everywhere; and why have ugly furniture when that which is beautiful and appropriate is within reach? Only they *were* furniture, nothing more. Victoria made you feel that. That was where the clearness of her artistic perception made itself apparent. Most people didn't

understand it: most people didn't understand her; but they did understand that somehow her room was different from every other person's room. They were not quite sure if they liked it any more than many of them were quite sure if they liked her, especially if they happened to be persons who would have been glad to go and do likewise, if only they could manage to grasp how it was done. These people looked at Victoria's room and thought it was very simple indeed. After all, Sheraton furniture is not unattainable if you have a moderate amount of money, and the imitations are really very good; while a silver inkstand and blotter can be had any day. Old prints, too, can be got together and hung, as Victoria's were hung, in straight rows. A Bechstein piano and shoals of photographs of places and people—principally people—are not unknown adjuncts of modern life; nevertheless, all these tolerably familiar objects got together in Victoria's little turret-room did not somehow look nearly so charming in the rooms of other persons—perhaps because Victoria made her room, as she made most things in life, answer to her purpose, while the other persons made their purpose answer to their rooms. Or perhaps because Victoria was Victoria, and not the other persons.

But when she used to boast, as she did frequently, that the den was a collection of odds and ends, that she never bought anything for it she could possibly help, and never, never, *never* bought anything because it happened to be "the fashion,"—well, the other persons didn't believe her, that's all! Nevertheless it was true. And it was also true that, as she told everyone, everything in the room had a history

attached to it. That perhaps was, partly, how it came to be such a home-y sort of abode. As to flowers, Victoria had them everywhere. Just now the room was full of white chrysanthemums. They stood about in pots, and jars, and glasses, on the writing-table and the mantelpiece, and in the corners, the soft, feathery petals showing here and there against red leaves of trailing virginia creeper.

That was how the room looked, as the candle-light, and the red glow of the fire, and the fading mistiness of the twilight blended together in a sort of incongruous harmony. Any one who knew Victoria would have seen scraps of her special belongings cropping up. A treatise on "violin-bowing" lay open on the writing-table, among the silver things which shone in the fire's glow; a score of violin music, fingered in pencil by the great Joachim himself, fluttered on the open piano; across the wall, above the mantel-board, in a long line was a set of photographs of all the great composers, from Gluck to Wagner, with Beethoven in the centre of the line. As to other photographs, they stood about in every variety of frame, and some even without frames. In one corner, too, there were a couple of tennis rackets and a set of golf sticks—but these were dusty.

Victoria tuned her violin rapidly, and set to work at one of Bach's solos. Ada Barclay curled herself up in a corner of the window-seat, her fair head silhouetting itself against the pale glow of the fading light, reflected on the lattice panes. The Bach solo had proceeded for about three bars, when, in the middle of a strong wailing note from the violin,

an equally strong and wailing note mingled with it, coming in the direction of the door. Victoria lowered her violin and opened the door.

"Come in," she said, addressing someone outside. Apparently the invitation met with but a hesitating response, for—

"Come in and be quick about it," said Victoria again.

She was addressing William the Conqueror, who paused as she spoke—paused with superb unconcern. His sombre, amber-coloured eyes looked past her in contemplative disdain for a moment. Then he looked behind with deliberateness at the turret stairs, bringing his head after another moment round once more to face his mistress. After that he put one paw forward slowly, and moved his body in advance about the eighth of an inch.

Victoria stamped her foot.

"*Will* you come in?" She raised her voice as she said it, and stooped to expedite his entrance.

Forthwith he skipped across her path with incontinent and elusive rapidity, landing himself in the middle of the room. There he stood still, and gazed at Miss Barclay, who laughed with considerable relish.

Victoria shut the door with a small bang, whereat Miss Barclay laughed still more.

"You are his slave," she said, "and it is so lovely to think of its being you."

"I am a fool," said Victoria, and then she too laughed.

"I should not have thought *you* could be so weak," pursued the other, and she smiled at Victoria as she said it, but it was a smile more of admiration than anything else.

"I!" exclaimed Victoria,—"I!" She gave the screw of her bow an impatient twist. "My dear child, I'm the weakest creature living, now and then."

The younger girl looked serenely incredulous.

Victoria lifted her fiddle to her shoulder once more, and the Bach solo began again.

William the Conqueror, after a yawn or two of ostentatious boredom, selected with care the most comfortable chair he could find, and, having rolled himself into a black ball, went to sleep on his head.

Twilight deepened into shadow, till the candle-light in the room had matters all its own way. Victoria worked hard, though, to the listener in the window, it seemed to be an easy task which lay beneath the player's fingers. The clock had struck seven before Victoria once more lowered her violin and turned to her companion.

"Ah!" she said, stretching out her right arm, "Bach *is* as tough as nails; but what a study after all! You have been very patient, Ada, but I believe you have been asleep."

But if Miss Barclay had been asleep, she was wide awake enough now to repel the assertion with indignant haste.

"Indeed I have been nothing of the kind!" she exclaimed; "I have been quite enchanted."

"What a pretty speech! Well, you shall have something for pleasure now—your pleasure and mine."

She raised the fiddle again and drew the bow across the strings musingly, letting her fingers wander into a little roulade of notes in descending intervals. Almost imperceptibly they glided into distinct harmonies, until presently a fragment of

Vieuxtemps' began to make itself heard. The notes grew and strengthened softly until the whole "Romance" was complete in every part. Victoria played from memory, and her eyes were lifted upwards slightly, and looked darker even than their wont. At the close, after the strings under her hand had literally quivered into silence, she laid her violin in its case and went over to the window beside her friend. The latter turned her fair head towards Victoria and looked up in her face. Victoria put her hand on the girl's shoulder and smiled down upon her, one of the rare smiles kept for very special people; but as the younger girl met it she flushed a little, even in the shadow.

"Why, what an impressionable child it is!" said Victoria, smiling more broadly.

Ada Barclay glanced down shyly.

"I d—d—don't know how you do it, for," she stammered confusedly, "you seem t—to hate all that sort of thing."

Victoria's eyes twinkled.

"What sort of thing?" she said ruthlessly.

"Oh—sentiment, and—romance, and—all that sort of thing." She laughed, but it was an apologetic laugh, and she kept her eyes fixed on the blind-cord, which she was twisting into hard knots.

Victoria looked still more amused.

"Well, a good deal depends on what you mean by sentiment and romance, and—er—all that sort of thing," she said coolly. "If you mean by it that I get a decent tone out of the fiddle—well, perhaps I do, but then *that* is technique, my dear girl."

The younger girl tossed her head back with an odd little gesture.

"I don't believe it," she said intrepidly; "it isn't technique, at least not altogether. There's something behind—there *must*, you know."

"There *is*," said Victoria quickly, "only—one can't talk about it——" She stopped abruptly and sat down on the window-seat beside her companion.

"So I am a monster of coldness, Ada?" The tone of her voice changed as she spoke, and took a faint sarcastic inflexion, but she flung one arm round Ada Barclay's shoulder, thinking as she did so how pretty the fair crinkly head was.

"No," was the response, "no, no, but—oh! you know what I mean. I mean you don't like anyone to care for you, or—or—*that*, you know."

Victoria gave the speaker a little shake. The latter had, it was evident, covered herself with confusion in the utterance of this speech.

"You baby!" said Victoria laughing. But she was not altogether pleased at the revelation which her friend's words implied.

"Don't be evasive, Ada; you mean simply that I dislike love-making, or being made love to, and so on." She shrugged her shoulders. "Well, I suppose that sort of thing is very well in its way. Probably it's necessary, possibly it's agreeable. To some persons, I have no doubt, it *is*—very agreeable."

"*Everybody*," struck in Miss Barclay timidly, "falls in love sometimes, don't you think?"

"Do they? They *think* they do, which—does as well, you say—doubtless. My dear Ada, love or what you call love, owes a great deal to poets and artists. They have transfigured it for their own purposes. I suppose they had a perfect right to do so, but, unfortunately, it has been done at

the sacrifice of actuality. As a matter of fact, in this world, love, or that particular sort of physical passion which has so largely monopolised the name of love, is a very pliable quality. You see, it depends for its existence on perfectly commonplace causes —physical, mental, and psychological causes. As to this 'love' enduring, as poets say it does,—my darling child, it's the most flagrantly fickle thing in human life."

"Then," interrupted the other point blank, "nobody ought to care for anybody?"

Victoria smiled.

"Oh, care if you like, but don't, for Heaven's sake, break your heart over the business. Keep it in its true proportion—if you can. The amusing part of it is that he, or she, always will have it that their sudden admiration is—*this* time—undying devotion. And the dear good creatures run the same gamut every time.

"Don't be horrid!" said Ada Barclay suddenly.

Victoria's dark eyes softened.

"Am I horrid? Well, one is tempted sometimes to be just detestable. After all, it's better to be 'horrid' than twaddly. Oh, good gracious! what a nation of twaddlers we are! And the greatest of all twaddle is, that we, English men and women, marry—for love."

"But we—I mean they, do!" and the conviction in her voice was so full and perfect and profound that Victoria sat back and laughed for three minutes.

"Ada, I am exhausted; you are a fine example of the efficacy of preaching as a method of carrying conviction to the mind of another. The second

bell went five minutes ago. Where shall we be at dinner-time?"

"Dinner,—I hate dinner!"

"For shame, Ada."

"It's *such* a bore," added the latter with deprecation.

"It is the noblest institution of the British constitution. We *may* love, we *must* dine. Dinner—it divides the morning and the evening; it is the central pivot of existence. Dinner—blessed sound! All is lost, but—dinner. Come what may, but let us dine, clothed and in our right minds (though this is a detail) at eight. It is so nice to know that if, to-morrow, we die, to-day at all events we can still dine."

She stood up and pulled Ada Barclay up with her.

"Ada, you force me to be rude. In plain English, darling, go and dress for dinner."

Ada Barclay drew closer to her with a shy little caressing gesture.

"When you talk like that," she said, and she smiled wistfully, "you—you *bother* me."

Victoria laughed wickedly.

"Ada, when *you* talk like that you refresh me."

The younger girl turned away suddenly.

Victoria's face changed, and she put out her hands and drew her friend back again close to her.

"You're a little goose"—the words were rude but the voice was not. "Did you ever hear of letting off steam? Yes? Speech is given as the valve, the safety-valve."

The face looking into hers cleared.

"Then you didn't mean it?" she said quickly.

Victoria smiled more broadly.

"About—er—love," added the speaker. She flushed a little.

"Love!" echoed Victoria. She caught her friend's hands and swung them to and fro, laughing a little. "Love, my child, is a disease, which is not generally considered fatal. It lasts, sometimes, six months, but it has been known to last a much shorter time. Very rare instances are recorded in which it lasts longer. Many remedies are suggested, but marriage generally is allowed to be the most efficacious."

She drew a long breath and stopped.

"*There*, Ada! Oh, don't laugh at the superior wisdom of your elders, dear!"

Ada Barclay looked full into the delicate smiling face.

"*You*," she said calmly—"you will care *awfully* for some one some day."

Victoria turned on her heel.

"God forbid!" she said quickly, under her breath.

Ada Barclay went out of the room—smiling.

CHAPTER IV.

"I SAY, Keppel, who's the chap with the hair?"

"Oh, that's Loevio. He's Victoria's chap, you know."

"Victoria's chap! what do you mean?" Jerry Annesley frowned.

"I mean he's her singin' chap. He's a new light, at least he's going to be a new light one of these days, and Victoria has got him down to sing at the Institute."

Annesley bestowed no more thought on the "chap with the hair." At that moment his own position occupied his mind very fully, and he was not one of those persons who can easily entertain more than one absorbing thought at one and the same time.

Just then he was considering whether, in view of what had passed between Victoria and himself, he ought to stay any longer at Eastaston. Certain vague notions, derived in part from the few novels he had ever read, led him to think that it was his duty under the circumstances to relieve Victoria of the burden of his bodily presence. At the same time it seemed to him that his case was not quite analogous to those of which he had read. The revelation of his feelings to Victoria that day had scarcely been a revelation in the accurate sense of the word. For he knew that during the past

few years she had been more or less acquainted with their state. Nor was it at all likely that his continued presence in the house would disturb the even tenor of her ways or thoughts in any degree. He wished he could flatter himself that it would. Had such been the case, the future would have looked more hopeful. But he could not lay even this much comfort to his soul. On the contrary, the perfectly immovable cheerfulness which she invariably displayed towards him showed not the faintest sign of alteration.

Taking all this into consideration, he came to the conclusion that further sacrifice was not required of him. It would have been a sacrifice on his part to have cut short his visit—indeed, a considerable sacrifice, to rob himself of the crumb of pleasure afforded in being at all events in the same house with her. He decided that he would stay on as if nothing had happened. His visit would not last many days longer. He had to go over to Ireland, and the Leathleys were going up to town for Victoria's forthcoming *début*. While his visit lasted he would keep out of her way, or rather, keep his feelings out of her way, as much as possible.

When he had settled all this with himself he felt better. There are temperaments which find it absolutely necessary to fight out everything to the end. To such, there is no possibility of facile displacement of questions which come up to be answered.

If this is a blessing, it is perhaps, on the whole, a blessing in disguise. But whether it be a blessing open or disguised, it tends to the production of certain qualities of strength in the character.

It tends, too, to be hard upon itself: but a strong character is invariably its own most pitiless judge. On the other hand, it is often unduly lenient towards others, which is its weakness. But no human character is free from weakness. With some, the weakness comes nearer to being strength than with others, that is all.

Annesley's decision was not a little influenced by Victoria's attitude towards him that day at dinner.

It happened that Mrs. Edmund Leathley had drawn lots, and Victoria had fallen to Annesley. He had only been made aware of this at the last moment, and, as he was not a man of quick resource, no method of alteration occurred to him. Besides, Victoria was late, only appearing in fact as everybody else was going in. When she did arrive, very hurried and breathless, a glance told her how things were. She just (apparently) rushed up to Annesley.

"Come on, Jerry; Gertrude is looking daggers at me."

And he became aware that Victoria's hand was lying on his arm, and that he was being swept along, and that everything was to go on as usual.

"I am suffering agonies of remorse," she said to him, in her rapid, rather cold accents, as she unfolded her napkin, "about my friend Mr. Loevio. I forgot completely that he was coming to-day, and I went upstairs directly after tea to practise, and I imagine the wretched man has been left to the tender mercies of Gertrude, who didn't want to have him to stay."

"He probably got on all right," was all that Annesley could find to say.

Victoria shook her head.

"Nothing gets along all right if it begins by going wrong; besides, I know Gertrude. Don't imagine I mean to imply she's not a dear girl, for she is, but she's much dearer if she happens to like you, that's all."

"He seems all right," said Jerry stolidly.

"My dear Jerry, what would you have him seem? Nevertheless, I am put out about it. No, thank you" (to the butler). "I wish somebody would invent a perfect-memory system, a thing one could get at the stores—at a low price—to be used just when you want it."

"But then," struck in the young man who had been talking to Miss Barclay at tea, and whose name was Conway Keppel, "you'd forget when to use it, and then,—why, then you'd be where you are, don't you see?"

"I see you," said Victoria coolly, while Annesley wondered what the deuce it was all about.

Mr. Keppel laughed.

"You don't appreciate your privileges, as the parsons say," he retorted.

Victoria (who hated most kinds of fish) was leaning back in her chair crumbling her bread

"I wish," she said to Jerry, and she lowered her voice a good deal, "that people would stick to their own conversations, and not break in upon those of others."

"I never do," said Annesley simply.

"No, no, you are admirable."

Annesley winced.

"What's the chap with the hair going to sing?" he said abruptly, in a wild and vague desire to get into shallow waters.

Victoria's little, cold, dark eyes shot a look at him.

"I don't think I know yet. We have left a place for him to choose. The whole affair is quite informal —rather harum-scarum, I think. But now we have the Institute I suppose we ought to make use of it. Gertrude is under the impression—I believe she has got it from Mr. Gladstone—that the regeneration of England is to be accomplished by means of village institutes. I'm sure I hope it will. Gertrude has a large faith. A large faith is one of the most comfortable cushions I know: Lean on me, my dear, it always seems to say; and it is so sustaining, if not invigorating, when one does lean. At the same time, I'm open to conviction, I'm always open to conviction, and improvement is the order of the day."

"Eh?" said Mr. Keppel, catching the last sentence. "Improvement? Oh, hang improvement! I should like to start a Society for the Disimprovement of the Human Race." He put up his eyeglass and poised his fork over his plate. "The Disimprovement of the Human Race," he repeated impressively.

"Go on," said Victoria, "we await your revelation."

Nobody shall belong to it who has ever done, ever will do, or ever wants to do, anything 'useful.'"

Jerry Annesley laughed.

"My dear old boy, open it to the public by all means. You'll get swarms of members."

"No Irish," returned the other with gravity,—"no Irish need apply."

Annesley laughed still more.

"Jerry," said Victoria, "that was one for you."

"It is the New Journalism," said Annesley, with sudden inspiration.

Mr. Keppel paused.

"Where was I?" he said to Victoria.

"That is what we are dying to know."

"Oh, yes—the improvement of the human race has failed; you can't deny that?"

"I never deny anything," protested Victoria, "not even absurdity."

"I do not expect to meet with approval, and I look for no reward; no reformer ever does."

"Virtue," said Victoria, "I have heard, is its own reward. I must admit that I always inclined to think it was a shabby one. I daresay I could find a reformer or two who would share my opinion."

"It strikes me," put in Jerry, "that we are beginning to shoot pretty wide."

"Not at all," said Victoria; "everything helps—in the disimprovement of the human race."

She looked at Conway Keppel.

"Well, why don't you go on?"

"I will, in a moment, but it's difficult to elaborate on the spot. But you admit that improvement has failed?"

"I fancy I have heard that before somewhere," said Victoria; "still, I am willing to admit that the results are not—brilliant, if that is what you want."

"Precisely; then, I say, try the other way round."

"I'm equally willing to agree to that, only you must give us a *carte de pays*."

"Nobody shall attempt to do his or her duty."

"Looks easy, anyhow," said Annesley sotto voce.

"Do you think so?" returned the author of the scheme. "You are mistaken. The chief difficulty will be to get out of people's heads the hazy conviction (it is hazy, but it's there all the same) that

they *ought* to do 'their duty.' In my Society nobody must think that they 'ought' to do anything. That belief has engendered more envy, malice hatred, and all uncharitableness than, roughly speaking, any other factor in human life. Moreover, duty is a monster, a hideous Moloch, in whose revolting service more victims have been sacrificed than would people myriads of happy worlds——"

He paused abruptly, because something "on toast" had just come round. When his faculties became once more disengaged he perceived that Victoria was laughing.

'It is only Jerry," she explained; "he merely wants to know if you intend to leave off shaving and wear 'reach-me-downs.'"

Mr. Keppel was pardonably annoyed. His toilet was a business of life too serious and too perfect to bear ribald jeers.

"I think," he said, with a composure that did him credit, "we were discussing the mental and moral aspects" (the employment of alliterative adjectives always afforded him pleasure), "the mental and moral aspects of—of—er——"

"Yes?" said Victoria innocently.

"Fire away, old boy," said Annesley.

"The question."

"Bravo!" exclaimed Victoria.

"Good old question," said Annesley simultaneously.

"Oh, look here," said the speaker, with a sudden change of tone, "when you both drop down on a fellow like this, there's no earthly use in talking rationally."

"Then," said Victoria, with malice aforethought, "you did contemplate talking rationally?"

"No, I didn't. Talking rationally means, according to law, talking nonsense."

"Oh!" murmured Victoria. "This what d'ye call it, this mental and moral question, is getting us out of our depth."

Conway Keppel grinned.

"You give me time—you give me time to elaborate; you see, if I don't—er—don't put a head on it."

"I am exceedingly obliged to you," returned Victoria, "for your kind offer, and also for your sudden relapse into English as she is spoke. I shall look forward to seeing the head put on. At the same time, let me, as a friend, remind you of what the *World* (I mean the newspaper, not the universe) calls your 'social duties.' I have no doubt that a mind like yours is capable of advising Mrs. St. John as to the easiest and most reliable method of 'Banting,' and of elaborating—is that the word?—at the same time the Disimprovement of the Human Race. If you can persuade Mrs. St. John to 'Bant' you will be capable even of the *improvement* of——"

"Mrs. St. John," interrupted Conway Keppel in a shameless whisper into the speaker's ear, "is eating ice pudding like a steam-engine."

"Jerry," said Victoria, "Conway declares that steam-engines are fed with ice pudding."

'He's overdoing it," said Annesley in the same tone; "all those columns and paragraphs are going in on his brain. I say, Keppel! hi, Keppel!"

But Mr. Keppel had returned to his "social duties."

"I want you, Jerry," said Victoria, "when we go away, to look after Mr. Loevio for me. Get Conway Keppel to talk to him, if you can. Remember he won't care to be shrieked at about 'short-horns' or

'Polled Angus,' and I don't suppose he's deeply devoted to the drainage question. Remember he's an artist, and he's never been here before."

Annesley looked at her.

"All right," he said with a smile; "I'll have an eye to him, never you fear. Where on earth did you pick him up?"

Victoria looked amused.

"I didn't pick him up at all. He's one of the new tenors, and an actor. People know nothing about him yet, but they will know one of these days. Ford found him, and Ford is going to——"

"Boom him?" said Jerry.

Victoria nodded, and laughed.

"It's only while you're in here; I can look after him myself afterwards. I wonder, by the way, if he plays billiards."

"I should rather say so," returned Annesley drily; "his hair looks like it."

"Nonsense!" said Victoria; "his hair is magnificent."

Annesley looked straight in front of him.

"Jerry," said Victoria, after a pause, "'the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.'"

"Yes," said Annesley; "I was thinking of music."

"Music!" echoed Victoria.

"Yes," said Annesley dreamily. "'Get your hair cut.'"

"You are flippant," said Victoria, "and you are vulgar. I'm glad it is time for me to go."

CHAPTER V.

WHEN Mr. Louis Loevio went up to his room that night, he could tell himself that he was having a "fairish" time of it. Altogether, this sort of life fell in admirably with Mr. Louis Loevio's ideas as to the pleasures of existence. It is true that the first moments of his arrival had not been *quite* —well, quite rapturous. Victoria had spoken truly when she said that her sister-in-law, although a dear girl, was apt to be a good deal "dearer" if she happened to like you.

Mrs. Edmund Leathley was one of those persons whom a beneficent Providence has blessed with what are popularly known as very "clear views." She had clear views on every subject. Clear views form, no doubt, an admirable equipment for the conduct of life. At the same time, it is doubtful whether they tend to endear their possessors to less fortunately gifted humanity.

Regarding Mr. Louis Loevio, Mrs. Edmund Leathley's clear views left her in no manner of doubt. She believed that the entertainment of a professional singer and actor—of small reputation—for two days at Eastaston was a quite unnecessary and overstrained interpretation of the laws of hospitality.

"The man," she had said, "could come and sing, and put up at the 'Jolly Ploughman' (Mrs. Bridge will make him most comfortable), and go back to

where he came from. At least, that is what Edmund and I think."

She always said "Edmund and I," because her irreproachably clear views pointed out to her that man and wife should be one in opinions as well as in law. Victoria had once or twice, when Gertrude's clear views got on her nerves, which clear views have a tendency to do, felt strongly tempted to reveal to her sister-in-law that Edmund Leathley had no opinion on any subject except what she, Gertrude, told him to have; but happily Victoria had remembered herself in time, and was enabled to avoid making an enemy for life.

However, Mrs. Edmund Leathley had been overruled by her father-in-law and by Victoria respecting Mr. Loevio's entertainment. She had submitted to the overruling with outward and visible grace, because her inward and admirable common sense told her that she was not exactly mistress of Eastaston yet, and that Mr. Leathley's regard for his youngest daughter and her wishes might, in the event of hers clashing with them, lead him to persuade Victoria to take possession once more of all those glories of châtelaineship which, at her eldest brother's marriage, she had yielded up freely with a sense of relief to her eldest brother's wife.

Nevertheless, no power on earth could induce Mrs. Edmund Leathley to receive Mr. Louis Loevio with outward and visible favour. She gave him bed and board, she was prepared by-and-bye to give him a cheque; farther than that she told herself she was not bound to go. As a matter of fact, farther than that she did go, for she gave him (in five minutes) her clear views about himself.

Mr. Louis Loevio was not likely to forget the first half-hour of his stay at Eastaston, even if it must be admitted that, up to this, he had not been in the habit of paying visits in country houses.

Professional singers of small reputation may all the same have feelings which can be hurt. To do Mrs. Edmund Leathley justice, her clear views did not include such a possibility, any more than they included the possibility of acting in such a case herself as an instrument of torture.

But the first half-hour was succeeded by pleasanter experiences. It was succeeded by such a dinner as Mr. Loevio had not enjoyed half a dozen times in his life, for the Arts, in their obscurer dwelling-places, do not, as a rule, include—gastronomy.

Dinner was followed by the society of Victoria and her friend, the very young lady with the fair crinkly hair; and the latter, in due course, by the smoking-room, where he had had the best cigar he ever put between his lips, and a whisky and soda which would make any man feel good and noble and inclined to cry over his past life. Indeed, he found it by no means easy to decide which he had enjoyed most in the evening's pleasure, but on the whole he was inclined to give the preference to the young ladies.

His fine blue eyes grew moist as he thought of them especially of Miss Barclay.

"Lor'!" he said to himself—for he was English, remarkably English, when he was alone, in everything except his name and the length of his hair, "those tip-top high-flying girls are the thing for me—make things hum, 'pon my soul. There's nothing

like high breeding; hang me if it ain't free and easy, and yet it ain't, all out! That innocent-looking one now, with the fair hair"—he sighed regretfully.

He was sitting on the edge of his bed in his shirt sleeves, his head sentimentally inclined to one side.

"They're a rum lot anyhow, but I suit 'em nicely. Miss Leathley, 'pon my soul, made more of me than she did of the nob with the eyeglass, a long sight more. She's a daisy anyhow, and a first-rate artist—I wish I knew as much about it, that's all I can say. Though what the devil does she want plaguing about Art, with a father who might be a lord if he liked, any day! She's an out-and-out thoroughbred, too. I'm not sure if I don't like her better than the innocent-looking one,—more grit in her, and, if she can't hold a candle to the young one in looks, she's got a damned haughty toss-my-head-in-the-air look about her that fetches me like wax. And, by the living Jingo, she has a clipping figure, and, in a woman, give me *figure*!

"Hang it all,"—his eyes grew sullen,—"I'll go to bed; it's the shortest cut to to-morrow."

Yet, before he blew out his candle, he looked round his room once or twice again.

Even in the nervousness of his arrival, and being asked for his keys, the room had been a surprise to him. He had had an idea that those persons whom he was pleased to call "nobs" occupied bedrooms in their own homes something similar to the best bedrooms at such hotels as the Métropole and the Continental. He had been prepared for an apartment of dizzy loftiness, for ceilings all cornices and stucco, for a good deal of gilding,

and for marble—everywhere. This old-fashioned room was a revelation, with its low ceiling, and its clear flowery-patterned wall-paper, and its clear flowery-patterned chintz hangings, and its Kidderminster carpet, and its plain solid mahogany furniture, and not so much as a marble-topped anything within its four walls. He looked at the queer sporting pictures on the wall, old prints in very high colouring and very black frames, and at the serge-covered table at the foot of his bed, furnished with every requisite material for writing his letters, to reassure himself of his whereabouts.

"*Eastaston Manor,*

Eastaston,

Berks,"

was stamped upon the note-paper in the letter-case; he had read it himself, twice. There was no mistake about that, nor about the elaborate preparations for his bath. These were, to him, sign-manuals of his sojourn in this strange abode.

He found it very pleasant even in its strangeness. But before he went to sleep he made up his mind that when he went back to London he would take some lessons at a shooting-gallery, and buy a book about small game. The girl with the pretty crinkly hair had thrown him into profound confusion by a remark about the "guns," and when he discovered that his host good-naturedly meant to give him a bit of pheasant-shooting on the morrow he knew there would be nothing for it but to develope a sore throat before morning.

On the following morning, accordingly, he told

Victoria that he had in fact felt his throat uncomfortable the night before, and that his feelings —his feelings could be better imagined than expressed at the thought of disappointing his audience. He said it with tears, or what looked like them, in his eyes. His voice was even a little hoarse, no doubt from the mingled disturbance of his feelings and his vocal cords.

"There is but *one* remedy," he said sadly; "I must chain myself to the house—I must chain myself to the house."

His best conversation, like his best clothes, was apt to be a trifle florid. He had a preference too for the Italian model, consequent, perhaps, on a year at Milan and Florence. His accent on these occasions had a faint foreign intonation. The makings of a superlatively clever actor existed in Loevio. When he spoke with that faint foreign accent it became (for the time) his own.

Victoria was quite sympathetic. It was too bad. She was so sorry. Did he think he had caught cold? Could Mrs. Tibbs do anything? Mrs. Tibbs had a black currant jelly recipe that had never been known to fail!

Loevio behaved beautifully. He sat in the library the whole livelong day with his feet on the fender: he refused pressed beef and game pie at luncheon; he even swallowed Mrs. Tibbs' black currant jelly recipe, and swallowed it so scalding hot that he felt as if not only the skin of his throat, but the skin of other parts, which need not be particularised, had been temporarily removed. He only drew the line at Mrs. Tibbs' proposal of a flannel bandage round his neck. He told her, with more bows and

flourishes than that excellent housekeeper had ever received during the whole course of her administration, that Sir Morel Mackenzie had absolutely forbidden him under any circumstances to touch his neck with flannel.

Towards evening he declared himself better. He said it was all Mrs. Tibbs' jelly, and he gave her a sovereign in the library before he went to dress for dinner. While he was dressing he felt that, on the whole, it had been an expensive sore throat. But he was better—better at dinner, and better still after dinner. There was now no doubt but that he would be able to fulfil his engagement, and he would run over the songs early on the following morning. Meantime, he was all penitence at his own "unpardonable stupidity" in getting his "wretched throat upset again."

"But it is our penalty," he said to Miss Barclay, "the penalty of a tenor voice. Tenor voices are so much quicksilver—a change of temperature and your upper register is done for.'

Miss Barclay smiled upon him with bewitching good faith.

"With me," he said, and he felt desperately sentimental as he spoke, "matters are singularly unfortunate. Only last year Morel Mackenzie said to me, 'My dear Loevio, your throat must be your constant care—your constant care. It is a hard thing to tell a man whose throat is his stock-in-trade, but it is for your own good. If you don't take care of it your throat will go.' It spoils one's life a bit being told a thing like that, but there!"—he shrugged his shoulders very slightly—"life is not for play, at least it is not for play to us players

whose work is to play to you. If my throat went I should not care to live; what should I have to live for? what should I have to live on? Nothing."

He spread out his hands, and then he pushed up his hair. He had a quantity of rich auburn hair, theatrically arranged and disposed in effective and very natural waviness. He was, beyond question, an exceedingly handsome man, although, beyond question, the doom of tenor singers—obesity—would in middle age overtake him. At present, however, he was graceful and—plump. He could still look sentimental and look well. In moments like this, when he had a pretty girl to look at him and to listen to him, he believed in himself, although he had seen Sir Morel Mackenzie once in his life—in a box at Covent Garden Theatre. But with a young girl, or with any woman, young or old, a pathetic story about yourself leads to the best results. And Miss Barclay was so young and so pretty, and so —Loevio thought how good a thing it was to be a "nob," and have such girls as these to play with. He sighed with such genuine regret at the thought of certain impossibilities that Ada Barclay felt quite interested in him, and really vexed with herself because she could not honestly come to the conclusion that he was quite a gentleman.

"You must not take too gloomy a view," she said with her bright honest smile. "After all, the worst doesn't always happen, does it? It would be too dreadful, you know, if it did."

He smiled pathetically, and shook his auburn head.

"Ah, if I were a beautiful young girl like you nothing could be gloomy!"

Miss Barclay grew a little pink. She was scarcely used to men who called her a beautiful young girl to her face, and the experience was not altogether pleasing. Nevertheless, on the whole he got on very well, and about his singing there could be no two opinions. Even Mrs. Edmund Leathley's clear views quite approved of his singing.

When he came to run over the songs on the following morning, he expressed to Victoria a great desire to sing Spohr's most lovely ballad "The Maiden and the Bird"—with, he added insinuatingly, the accompaniment that included a violin obligato, which (he trusted) *she* would consent to play.

Victoria was not quite sure about it.

"I fancy," she said, "that it will be quite over their heads."

Loevio looked inimitably grave.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "Art should seek to elevate, to ennoble."

It may have been the enunciation of this irreproachable sentiment, or his persistence, which was gentle and continuous, or Victoria's own intense appreciation of the song, to which her violin obligato, even in "running over it," contributed not a little—but he had his way.

CHAPTER VI.

THE Institute at Eastaston was a small red-brick building; designed after one of the most approved models in modern architecture, namely, that of the (supposed) English farmhouse of a century or two ago. In spite of its newness, some wistaria and virginian creeper had been induced to climb up its walls, although similar attempts with ivy and a white rose tree had not been equally successful. However, the red walls and red roof and miniature balcony of pitched pine, garnished as the latter was just now with the ruddy leaves of virginian creeper, looked picturesque enough, as picturesque is spelt in these days—the whole thing irresistibly reminding one of those pretty dwellings from whence Mr. Gilbert's charming heroines and happy peasants trip forth upon the stage with graceful gaiety.

Mrs. Edmund Leathley had that subdued but inextinguishable pride in the Institute that parents exhibit in the case of a favourite child. She was its secretary, its treasurer, its librarian. She chose the books and the papers, she drew up the bye-laws and settled the hours of admission. She was under the impression—an impression fixed and immovable as the twinkling stars of the firmament—that as a caterer for the public amusement it competed successfully with the "Jolly Ploughman."

She was also under the impression that so philanthropic, far-sighted, and liberal a friend of the masses—of Eastaston village—had never before been connected with the Leathley family.

Since her marriage, Eastaston village had been plunged into a wild whirl of industrial exhibitions, cottage flower shows, and Girls' Friendly meetings. The thirst for dissipation thereby engendered was believed by Mrs. Edmund Leathley only to be slaked by such a draught of gratification as the Institute could supply. In her own cup of philanthropic delight but one drop of bitterness mingled, —simply that, no matter what variety of entertainment her especial conception of rustic amusement allowed her to provide, the proportion of men to women present at the same was, roughly speaking, one in twenty.

Mr. Leathley and Victoria had been known to make remarks upon this ominous symptom that were perhaps more amusing than gratifying. But the founder could always interpose her clear views in complete contravention of their strictures. As Victoria said, she would have died rather than have admitted the existence of one element of failure in her undertaking.

The concert for which Mr. Louis Loevio's services had been requisitioned was Mrs. Edmund Leathley's latest and most ambitious effort in the way of public amusement.

When Mr. Leathley saw the programme, he said it would be much better if Conway Keppel and Hugh (his youngest son) blacked their faces and sang plantation songs in striped calico trousers to banjo accompaniments. But his daughter-in-law

would not permit any such corruption of the rustic taste.

"Nothing," she said seriously, "will induce me to vulgarise our entertainments with striped calico trousers! No—no—no! I won't have them."

"I am willing," said Conway Keppel, with grave languor, "to do anything to oblige. I shall be happy to dispense with the trousers if you think it would be likely to be—er—more—er—refined."

"It certainly would," replied the rustics' friend, musingly. "Still——why, what on earth are you all laughing at?"

Victoria, with tears of mirth in her dark eyes, essayed the explanation of their hilarity. But an attempt to explain a joke to a person whose sense of the ridiculous is not attuned to yours, or indeed sharply perceptive at all, is seldom successful. Mrs. Edmund Leathley remained incapable of perceiving anything in her speech provocative of mirth. The programme of her concert likewise remained free from the vulgarising influence of striped calico trousers. The former was select, classical, and as unsuited to the nature of the audience as it well could be.

One part of it alone was an unqualified success —Loevio's singing of Spohr's song. Few singers indeed could have brought the song within the comprehension of such an audience. That he was able to do this, and to do it beyond all doubt, was an achievement that, to those who understood the matter, was about as notable a triumph in its own way as an artist could win.

Before he had sung three bars, Loevio knew that, as he expressed it to himself even while he was

singing, "he was going to take the cake." He put his whole strength and his whole art into this song, to which he had persuaded Victoria to play the violin obligato. Scarcely one of those who heard him but could feel the beauty of expression and effect which he drew from the apparently simple notes. But it was perhaps only an artist like Victoria who could fully appreciate the cleverness of his achievement. If his method of singing could in some respects be taken exception to by a severely critical and cultured musician, the overwhelming richness of his voice and his instinctive and consummate mastery of its capabilities almost made amends. Whatever Art may have withheld from Loevio, Nature had given him a superb voice.

Moreover, the man was an actor, and the thousand and one dramatic possibilities of a situation in which *he* played the chief part spread themselves before him. The joy of holding his audience, the joy of the true artist, invigorated him. For these few minutes he knew that he held these people, gentle and simple, in the hollow of his hand. It was but a poor occasion, only an insignificant audience in a village room, but it was a foretaste of greater triumphs to come. He could sway these people, he could play upon their senses and their souls, even as Victoria made the violin strings respond to the touch of her fingers; he knew that by-and-bye he would sway other audiences too, for human nature is the same here in the village and there at Covent Garden and the Albert Hall: the touch which can awaken and enchant does not lose its cunning because one audience is great and another little. Nay, it is harder, as Loevio knew, to win

a response from the English rustic than from the most critical company who ever crowded the Scala at Milan.

> "But oh! the joy of that duet,
> Through all my life I'll ne'er forget."

Loevio sang in English, in deference to the nature of his audience, but the somewhat commonplace translation of the refrain was transformed by the power of the artist as much as by the inimitable melody of the music.

"Through all my life I'll ne'er forget." The words in their ringing melody echoed and re-echoed through the room. In the *timbre* of Loevio's voice there was too a natural pathos, which his keen sense of dramatic fitness told him how to use.

Mr. Leathley sat with his hand over his mouth; Conway Keppel dropped his eyeglass and his air of criticism, and forgot to resume either for fully five minutes; the tears were in Ada Barclay's sweet childish eyes; Annesley was looking at Victoria's face. The sarcasm had died out of it. He noted the softening of her eyes, the emotion in the curves of her lips. A sort of dull anger and jealousy took hold of him. Even "that cad" could bring into her face something which he was powerless to awaken. He had never in his life touched the finer chords of her nature. It hurt him that a mere abstract thing like music should have rule over her. He could not understand it, he could only at such moments as these even realise that it was so, and that he rebelled against it.

But perhaps Loevio was himself the most moved. The success of his singing thoroughly

aroused and quickened his facile emotional temperament.

When the song was ended he looked at Victoria; and when he looked at Victoria he forgot even Miss Barclay's presence beneath him in the front row. Victoria's evident delight and appreciation were more to him than the presence of fifty Miss Barclays. Victoria was an artist, and Loevio's artistic aspirations were too genuine not to lead him to desire passionately the approval of his fellow-artists. Besides, Victoria fascinated him. The charm of complete novelty, to him irresistible, was greater with her than with the younger girl. He was more at his ease with Miss Barclay, but Victoria quickened his interest. Her intense refinement, personal and intellectual, subdued him. Her pride and sang-froid excited his admiration. Her womanhood swayed his senses.

When he found himself for a moment alone with her in the smoky little room at the back of the platform, where the caretaker lived, his exaltation of spirit emboldened him to look into her eyes.

"Your accompaniment," he said, as her eyes met his, "was my inspiration. It whispered to my soul a golden word of encouragement."

It was a speech, to say the least of it, not quite in the best taste. Most of Victoria's friends would have been surprised at the very tolerant smile with which she listened to it. But, then, most of her friends would probably have not remembered that the frailest creature upon earth is perhaps the artist, tempted with his, or her, own praises.

Therefore she smiled without any shadow of coldness or disapproval full into Loevio's ardent blue eyes.

"But oh! the *joy* of that duet,
Through all my *life* I'll ne'er forget."

The words had scarcely passed his lips when he knew that he had blundered. He had forgotten himself. Her eyes swept over him with perfect composure.

"I think it went very well, thank you." She said it formally. She was a little pale. And she turned away and left the room at once.

"She's as proud as ten devils," said Loevio to himself; "but she's adorable—lor'! she's adorable!"

Then he went and sat down near Ada Barclay.

CHAPTER VII.

THE high-wheeled polo cart was waiting to take Mr. Louis Loevio to Long Farmley station. Mr. Loevio's portmanteau had been deposited in the back of the cart, and he was about to deposit himself beside the groom in front. He was making somewhat flourishing adieux to Victoria in the portico when the wheels of a second equipage came crunching their way over the gravel drive. The Eastaston groom backed the polo cart to make way for the newcomer. The latter was a large, hooded phaeton, heavily built, and very shabby. It had basket-pattern sides, once white, but now dimmed and yellowed by age—like the bridal dresses which forlorn maidens in romantic novels are continually finding in old trunks.

A stout cob drew the phaeton. The cob, like Mr. Crummles' immortal pony, was probably "a good one at bottom," but he was not much to look at; though it might also be said with truth that there was a good deal of him to look at—as regards his coat.

The charioteer of the phaeton was a lady, whose appearance, even at first sight, was sufficient to proclaim that she and Fashion had long since parted company. Nevertheless, in spite of this terrible fact, and of her exceedingly plain face, she was a fine-looking old lady, and she handled the reins

in a manner that would have shown any person who understood the matter that she had driven good cattle in her day. She came up the avenue taking her time—or, rather, the cob was taking *his* time. He walked solidly, with his head well down; his mistress sat erect, with her head well up. Very well up indeed, because she had been trained in the days of back-boards, when young ladies were taught to stand and sit and walk, before lounging was discovered, and when nobody under fifty who had the use of their limbs ever sat in an armchair. She glanced about her from time to time with a quick sharp turn of her eyes. Once she turned her head backwards to speak to a fat-faced freckled youth, who was clad in a livery coat, light-coloured tweed trousers of a "loud" pattern, and a chimney-pot hat which had seen rain. This youth sat perched up on the very small seat which stuck out behind the very large hood.

"Thomas," said the old lady, "you may go round and unyoke. Ask Jervis or some of them to let the cob stand in one of the boxes. Don't leave him in the yard, he has a cough still."

The old lady was evidently very much at home.

Thomas grinned, a cheerful grin of acquiescence. Thomas's grin was Thomas's favourite medium of communication with his fellow-creatures.

The cob, the phaeton, and the lady drew up at the portico. Thomas, with the eye of the groom upon him, sprang to the ground gallantly, and flew to the cob's head. The action was purely ornamental, for the cob was always obliging in the matter of standing still, but Thomas had rudimentary instincts under his stable-jacket.

His mistress threw aside the leather apron which covered the rug over her knees, and alighted. As she did so she caught sight of Victoria and Mr. Louis Loevio.

"Ah, Victoria, dear child!" and as she spoke her little fierce light-coloured eyes scanned Mr. Loevio in a quick flash.

"Well I'm jiggered!" said that gentleman to himself, "but here's a dowdy old dolly."

The "dowdy old dolly" put her hand into Victoria's.

"How are *you*?" she continued, "and where is everybody else?"

"Gertrude," said Victoria, smiling up at her, "is in the blue drawing-room, the rest of us are all about somewhere. I will come after you in a second." She glanced at Mr. Loevio.

The old lady, without further ado, walked across the outer hall, pushed open a door very determinately, and found Mrs. Edmund Leathley in the blue drawing-room.

"Good morning, my dear," she said briskly, as the latter rose up to greet her, "I hope you are very well. Where is all your family? and why is Victoria talking to a hairdresser at the hall door?"

"Oh!" exclaimed Victoria, "he is not a hairdresser." She had caught the words as she came in.

"Then why does he look as if he were a walking advertisement for somebody's wigs?" returned the old lady grimly, as Victoria put her arms round her neck and kissed her.

Victoria laughed.

"His unhappy hair," she said, "seems to set everybody's back up against him."

"I don't know anything about everybody's back, my dear," returned her visitor; "*my* back, I assure you, is neither set up nor down by it. Who is he?"

"One of the new singers," Mrs. Edmund Leathley interposed, in her matter-of-fact tones, "and"—with conscientious impartiality—"he really *does* sing well. Mr. Leathley says he has heard no tenor to equal him since Mario."

"Every new tenor is a new Mario," returned the old lady ironically. "The number of new Marios which appear and *dis*appear from time to time is amazing. What brings the man here?"

"He came down to sing last night at the Institute."

Mrs. Edmund Leathley's reply was given in something less than her usually slow decisive accents. The Institute had before now come in for laceration from the tongue of the tall old lady in the black alpaca cloak.

"I hope the Institute appreciated him," was her remark now. "But why should he be *here*?"

"That is precisely what *I* said," the immaculate Gertrude hastened to add, delighted to secure such an unwonted ally, "that is *precisely* what I said. I said, Why have him here, why have him to stay in the house? Victoria and her father believed it was incumbent on their hospitality to do so. I must confess *I* think their ideas of hospitality are a little overstrained."

She laughed, as superior persons laugh when they say things like that. Most people know that laugh.

"I daresay you do," responded this terrible old

lady, deserting her ally with instant and shameless indifference. "Hospitality which deserves the name is apt to seem overstrained nowadays. So *you*," she turned to Victoria, "are, as usual, the author of folly?"

"As usual," said Victoria, with quite appalling nonchalance.

"Don't be impertinent, madam, and don't let us waste time. I came over this morning to have some music. Shall we come upstairs now?—if you will excuse me," she added, turning to Mrs. Edmund Leathley with her old-fashioned courtesy, which never forgot itself.

Victoria stood up obediently.

"Where is your father?" enquired the old lady, as they went to Victoria's room. "I want to ask him if he has forgotten that there is such a person as Dorinda Payne in the world——my dear, what a beauty! Now does he re-pot them as I told him?'

She alluded to a magnificent chrysanthemum which stood beside Victoria's piano. And as she spoke, she just touched the white feather-like petals very gently with her fingers.

"Well, I don't know, Aunt Doll," replied Victoria.

They all called her Aunt Doll at Eastaston, although, as a matter of fact, she was only Mr. Leathley's second cousin.

"I'll ask about it," continued Victoria; "but our plants never seem to me to touch yours."

The elder woman shook her head, but she looked pleased.

"Tut! child, my plants have only an old woman to look after them. Your fine gentleman wouldn't

thank you for your opinion. Now—where's the music?"

Victoria placidly took up a portfolio.

"What shall we try, Aunt Doll?"

"Let me see, what have we here? H'm—h'm! the Kreutzer Sonata,—h'm! yes, come along. Tired? Nonsense! *I'm* not tired, at sixty-five."

She wheeled round suddenly on the piano stool.

"Do you drink claret? What? Yes! That's right. Now, are you ready? Begin."

They began. Victoria was evidently familiar with the order of proceedings at performances like this, for when, at the end of about six minutes, her visitor suddenly lifted her hands from the piano, and said,—

"I don't think we're quite together, Victoria child," the latter responded,—

"Well, I don't think we are, Aunt Doll," very much as a matter of course.

They had not been together from the start. Aunt Doll, whose musical acquirements were largely the result of self-teaching, played with excessive zeal, and extraordinary variations of the loud and soft pedals. Her regard for time was of the slightest; and she invariably chose to play the most profoundly difficult music which she could find.

"I hate," she said, "inferior imitations of the great composers—just as I hate electro-plate and sham jewellery."

She began the Kreutzer Sonata again with unruffled courage.

"Take from the top of the page, bar one, Victoria."

Victoria obediently started off once more. On they went—the violin on its normal course, the

piano crashing, flying, and loitering in turn, and in superb disregard of the violin part and of Beethoven, and of every rule which Art has laid down to govern concerted music.

Nevertheless, in this fashion both instruments in some mysterious manner actually came in at the last bar together. Victoria drew a long breath and laughed. Her companion laughed also.

"Well, well, well!" she exclaimed, raising her hands palms outward, "it's not bad for an old woman who has had two dozen music lessons in her life. Where are we now? Oh, yes; now—are you ready?"

In the *andante*, and in the *finale*, the piano came to awful grief. Victoria knew it would. It always did. And it always failed to disturb the pianiste's equanimity or arrest her progress in the slightest degree, because she had by this time become so thoroughly immersed in her own performance that the violinist had only to pick out a note here and there at intervals, and keep her instrument from interfering with the sweeping splendour of the piano's triumphal march of discord.

"Ah—h!" exclaimed the old lady, when a chord of perilous uncertainty as to its component parts, and of tremendous reverberation in its volume of sound, had once more brought her hands to a standstill, "I have one fault; I always get *fortissimo*, no matter how quietly I begin—always. It is horrible. It must, I fancy, be because I *think* in *fortissimo*. There, I have deafened you, and you are laughing at me. Yes, you are—don't contradict me: I hate lies. Ah!" as the door opened, "here is your father. Well, George, here I am, giving Victoria the benefit

of my instructions. So you are going to let her make a mountebank of herself before the British public? I am ashamed of you. George Leathley, you haven't the spirit of a mouse to let yourself be bullied by a little minx who only happens to be your own daughter."

Mr. Leathley passed his hand over his hair, and his eyes twinkled.

"My dear Dora, I am not a strong-minded——"

"Woman," rapped out his visitor, sharply.

"Well, woman, if you like to put it so."

"No, I don't," cried the other, rising at once to the fly. "I hate, loathe, and despise strong-minded women—monstrosities, the whole pack of them. But I like a *man* to have a will and a mind, and to keep them both in good fighting order."

"Ah, so do I. At least, I like other men to undertake all that; for myself, it's too much trouble."

"Trouble, trouble!" with a snort of rage. "Oh, you, *you*——"

"Come and have some lunch," said her host placidly. "Dora, I agree with you from the bottom of my soul, I always do agree with every word you say, and if you can get Victoria to remain like the modest violet in its lowly shade I shall be for ever grateful to you. I give you leave to try. Parental authority is at an end. It went out with crinolines and croquet, and I see no prospect of its coming in again."

"More shame for it, and more shame to you for allowing it!"

"*La Reine*, Fashion," pursued Mr. Leathley, sticking his thumbs in his waistcoat, and looking

complacently down his pudgy little figure to his very neat feet in their thick-soled, laced boots. "Who can dispute her commands? Not I."

"You will be sorry, and it will *rain* Fashion once too often."

And she was so delighted with this execrable pun that she suffered herself to be led away to luncheon quite meekly.

"Well, Master Conway," as that young gentleman came forward in the dining-room to greet her, "how do you do? and how are all the paragraphs and publishers?"

"Oh, tolerably fit, thank you," returned Mr. Keppel, languidly.

"Jargon," was the response, "I do not understand. If you have anything to say to *me*, be good enough to say it in the Queen's English." Conway Keppel smiled delightedly. "In *my* young days" (Mr. Keppel's smile grew broader, because "in my young days" was her favourite formula), "ladies and gentlemen left jabbering and jargon to the lower orders."

"There are no ladies and gentlemen in these days; consequently there are no lower orders," said Conway Keppel smoothly.

"I quite agree with you," was the curt response.

Mr. Keppel grinned appreciatively.

"By the way, where's old Jerry?" asked some one presently.

"I left him in the river fields potting rabbits by the ton," replied Conway Keppel, who was trying to persuade Miss Barclay to drink shandygaff. He pulled an envelope out of his pocket as he spoke, and showed it to her. "Just you look at that,"

he said, pointing to the stamp in the right hand corner, which was cleanly perforated by a small round hole. "He put a shot through that with a British bulldog at six yards."

"Mr. Annesley?" said the girl, interrogatively.

The speaker nodded.

"Yes, he's a nailer, ain't he? Awful good old chap."

The awful good old chap was at that moment sitting in solitude on a grass bank with his knees doubled up to his chin. His gun and three brace of dead bunnies lay beside him on the grass. The potting of rabbits by the ton had ceased, for the present. Annesley's fair, ruddy face looked sombre under his tweed cap. He looked tired, also. These days were trying him; all that could be said was, that it would have tried him still more to go away. Yet he would have to go away very soon. Business, connected with his home and his property in Ireland, called him to that distressful country. Moreover, he knew perfectly well that, even if he could do so, no course could possibly be more fatal to pursue with Victoria than to hang about her incessantly at all times and in all seasons. Unfortunately, that was precisely what it would have given him most pleasure to do. Nevertheless, so inexplicable are the ways of the man who is in love, that, although there was no earthly reason why he should not have been enjoying her society at lunch, he chose instead to sit alone on a grass bank, looking into a thick-set hedge. He knew that by-and-bye, when he was far enough away from Eastaston and from her, he would look back to these wasted moments and call himself a fool; yet he remained

all the same, sitting on the bank, staring into the hedge. But what he saw at that moment was, not the tangle of brown branches, the crumpled leaves, grey and faded under the wind of autumn; what he saw in imagination was Victoria's face, the delicate face with its deep, dark eyes, and refined, sarcastic mouth. He knew it tolerably well, and he knew that in all his acquaintance with it he had never seen in it a glimmer of hope for him. Would no power that he could summon to his aid, no force of love upon his part, ever awaken a glow of warmth in the pallid face which was his heart's delight? Annesley's clear, honest eyes grew dull and cold at the steady vision of disappointment which spread itself before him.

He was not a physiognomist or phrenologist, or any ist, he was only, so he told himself, an every-day sort of chap, who loved her better than anything else in the world, and had loved her for years, and would love her, he imagined, as long as he lived; but he knew when he looked in her face, because nature's own instincts told him so, that if his were not the touch which should win a response from her, some other would inevitably do so.

He shifted his cap a little farther over his eyes, and thought it out once more. Not that that process ever resulted in any tangible good. In the whole thing he could find only one satisfactory feature: the fact, of which he could assure himself, that so far there was no other fellow. In this respect a fair field lay before him. "If she didn't know me so well," his shrewd native wit said to him, "I'd stand a better chance."

He might, or he might not. Women like Victoria are very much what mathematicians designate "unknown quantities." But he was unaware of that, because he was a man too deeply in love to perceive much besides his love. Therefore he wondered now, with a pathetic inability to understand the nature of women, if there was any plan that he could hit upon which would further his cause.

It was characteristic of him that the possibility of her devotion to Art scarcely presented itself as a serious factor in the matter. When he told her that her marriage with him would leave her freer to pursue her career, he was sincere in his declaration that he would not actively interfere with it; but in his heart he believed that marriage would cure her of all desire for a career.

What is a woman's intellectual or artistic life in the eyes of a man who loves her? What is it that it should be taken into account? *He* wanted Victoria,—he the man, the ruler, the divinely appointed arbiter of woman's destinies. To him, as to every man of vigorous vitality and strong will, it seemed a hard thing that only a girl's puny opposition should stand between him and his heart's desire. He would not have tricked or trapped her, because to a man of Annesley's type there are certain possibilities of action which simply never suggest themselves as possibilities at all; but he would strive by every means in his power to win even a reluctant consent. A reluctant consent would have contented him, or he thought it would. If he could only take her in his arms, and caress her, and satisfy his love, he was quite sure he could awaken hers. Of anything further, it was only in moments of rare

spiritual insight that he thought at all. The marriage of true minds was about as much to him as it is to the average man in love. Intellect, spirit, soul, affected him, he believed, scarcely at all. He wanted her—to be his love, his wife, the mother of his children. That was all. Nevertheless, it was everything to him. His passions were not facile; consequently, they were proportionately strong and proportionately tenacious.

These were some of the thoughts which absorbed him as he sat there on the bank. In his absorption he took a handful of pebbles out of the dry ditch beside him, and began to shy them at a white spot on a particular twig. Pebble after pebble he flung at it and missed. His hands and feet grew cold, and the chill of the autumnal breeze nearly stung his face. Nevertheless, he kept on doggedly, aiming steadily, unweariedly, until at last he succeeded in hitting the mark three times in succession. Then, and not till then, he was satisfied. He stood up and flung away his last handful of pebbles, and stretched his cramped limbs.

CHAPTER VIII.

"GEORGE," said his cousin, "do you think you are wise?"

They were walking together in the Dutch garden, Mr. Leathley and his cousin. The Dutch garden might as well have been called the French garden, or the Italian garden, for anything especially characteristic of Holland which its trim clipped aspect presented; but it was a beautifully sunny spot, and a favourite spot with everybody at Eastaston in the autumn or winter months.

"Do you think you are wise?"

The tone of her voice as she repeated the question was very different from what it had been an hour earlier. Her whole personality, too, had undergone a change. The outlines of her plain razor-sharp features had softened graciously. The keen, faded eyes had grown sad—almost lustrous. Mr. Leathley met the glance of the latter steadily.

"Yes," he replied gravely, "I think—I hope I am."

"She is so young, and so excitable; and setting aside even that, there is always danger within and without."

"I know," said her cousin; "I agree with you; and I held out until I felt that it would be unjust as well as unwise to hold out any longer."

There was silence for a minute.

"Jerry Annesley is here," said the old lady suddenly.

"Oh, yes." Mr. Leathley smiled slightly as he replied.

His companion sighed impatiently.

Victoria's father looked at her and smiled again.

"My dear Dora, who is it that has said—'what is to be, will be?'" He spoke in the easy accents characteristic of him—half humorous, half cynical. "If Victoria is to end as the orthodox girl ends—in love and marriage—an excursion into another world for a little while first won't hinder that result. If she is not to end so, then she must have some other employment for her faculties. Victoria, you see, *has* faculties. Heaven has blessed, or cursed me, whichever way you like to put it, with one child out of five who has exceedingly exceptional faculties. I have a very strong notion that were I to arbitrarily interfere with her artistic inclinations I should destroy that which no human power could restore. Anyhow, I am going so far as to take all the blame, which is bad enough, and all the responsibility, which is worse, of the affair upon my own shoulders. God bless my soul! I wonder why I ever married; no man on earth was more unsuited."

"Few men on earth are better suited," said his cousin quietly. "George, you deserve well of your children. I hope Victoria appreciates her father."

Mr. Leathley stopped in his walk, and glanced round him with an air of caution.

"Dora, can you keep a secret? Well, Victoria is the only one of my children who understands *me*, and she is, moreover, the only one of them whom *I* understand; and, Dora,"—he paused, his eyes twinkled,—"she is the only child I have who *never bores me.* Now, 'pon my soul, I owe her one

for that. If she likes to amuse herself in her own way, she may do it. Besides, I am not at all sure that she has not a career before her. I know her. Others don't."

He pulled down his wristbands and closed his clean-cut humorous lips.

"Look here, Dora,"—his face changed and he stuck his hands deep down in the square pockets of his tweed coat. "Victoria is just like myself, and it never did with *me* to pull the strings too tightly. And if that dear old chap Jerry takes my advice, which is not likely (they never do take your advice in those affairs, though they come and ask for it, Heaven only knows why), he'll let Victoria run herself out. It's his only chance, as far as I can see. I always could manage women—always. I never had a quarrel with a woman in my life—'cos why? I always give 'em their heads."

He smiled, and she smiled, but she looked more amused than convinced.

"She is very young," she said again.

"She is five-and-twenty, and at five-and-twenty a woman ought to begin to know her way about. Victoria is by no means young for her age."

The old lady put out her hands with a curious gesture of impatient helplessness. Mr. Leathley smiled again very slightly. His expressive mouth took a certain curve.

"You would like to order her going, Dora. My dear cousin, that is the fatal mistake which parents and guardians *will* make."

"Nonsense!" was the response; "it is done every day, with the best results."

"And the worst," added her companion calmly.

"However, Dora, I will admit—for the sake of argument—that your plan succeeds in nine cases out of ten; in the tenth case—and a tenth case is inevitable—it is a hideous failure. Now Victoria, in this instance, is, in my humble opinion, the tenth case, and I, for my part, strongly object to any course which, with Victoria, would entail or imply from the outset even the possibility of hideous failure. I may, of course, be wrong. To err is human, very human indeed,—quite, one might say, a little monopoly of humanity; still, were I to go upon your plan, I feel *certain* I should be wrong. Of two evils, Dora, choose the lesser. Unfortunately, every course of human action contains possibilities of evil; one can only choose that which contains the least, at all events."

He met the glance of the angry light eyes very fully.

"I know what you are thinking of," he said, laughing.

"It is nothing to laugh at," was the quick retort.

"Pardon me, my dear Dora, it was only the feminine outlook which amused me."

"The feminine outlook, as you call it"—she smiled grimly—"will soon be an historic reminiscence."

Mr. Leathley laughed more heartily.

"The feminine outlook, Dora, is only undergoing certain modifications, like other outlooks at the present day. Perhaps you will permit me to say that there was room for improvement in its constitution—a *little* room for improvement," he added persuasively.

"Bah!" said his companion; "nothing on earth is improving."

"Not even ourselves, Dora?"



"Everything," pursued the tall old woman, "is topsy-turvy."
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"Everything," pursued the tall old woman, who towered over her small smiling companion, "is topsy-turvy. What will be the end of it all neither you nor I will live to see."

Mr. Leathley opened his lips.

"The gradual progress of the human race," he began composedly.

"The human race"—she repeated it with cutting scorn—"is no better to-day than it was in the Garden of Eden."

Mr. Leathley's lips twitched.

"Ah, that Garden of Eden," he spoke plaintively; "you women always get back to that Garden of Eden sooner or later."

"George," cried his cousin, "you are a fool!"

He smiled blandly, and looked as if it was the most comfortable thing in the world to be a fool.

"Yes, you are; and Victoria is your own child."

"So I have reason to believe,—I allude to your last statement. As regards your first, I am afraid the point of view comes in there too. But we were looking at the Garden of Eden, were we not? I am afraid the Garden of Eden has less charms for the young woman of to-day than it had for her mother. Victoria, at all events, appears to want none of it—at present."

"Ha!" said his cousin, "'at present'—you admit that much?"

"I do. That is what I desire to make allowance for."

"Then we are agreed."

He smiled.

"Well, perhaps as to the end, but not the means."

"George, your hair-splitting is abominable. I never could endure that sort of thing in my life

Keep it for the House of Commons. I'll tell you the plain truth, if you care to hear it. I wish Victoria was safely married."

"So do I, *safely* married. But the safety is just what I should like to insist upon; unfortunately, it is just what in all cases is more or less difficult to obtain; in Victoria's case, much more than less."

He dropped his air of banter and looked at her gravely.

"Now, Dora, don't be angry with me. You ask me to speak plainly. Very well, I will. You would, if you could, marry Victoria forthwith to Jerry Annesley?"

"I would," interrupted the old lady; "there is nothing like being open and aboveboard."

Mr. Leathley waited patiently.

"Very well," he resumed, after the interruption, "let us be open and aboveboard by all means, though the course in general is not free from objection. You believe that Victoria, as Jerry's wife, would be safe?"

"She would be safer," interposed his cousin again, "than careering about the world as a professional musician. George, I wonder you can contemplate such a thing for your daughter! To me it is an abomination."

Mr. Leathley again waited patiently. His infinite patience, with a point of view totally opposed to his own, was something more than remarkable, in a politician. But, then, George Leathley, to be sure, had never been a success as a politician.

Once more, when his cousin's voice ceased, he opened his lips.

"My contention is, Dora, that of two evils one should choose the lesser. In the present case, I

can conceive of few evils greater than to force or to induce Victoria to marry for the sake of safety, so-called. There are women with whom, on the whole, perhaps, such a course may be satisfactory, but Victoria is not one of them. If Victoria consented to marry Jerry Annesley to-morrow,—well, the Lord help Jerry, Dora!"

The humorous twist came round the speaker's mouth, and his eyes twinkled brightly again.

"Jerry," returned his companion, "would be able to help himself."

But she said it tentatively.

Mr. Leathley shook his head.

"I won't play ducks and drakes with Victoria's future, Dora."

"I should like to put it out of her power to make ducks and drakes of it herself."

"So should I, if I could. Unfortunately, I can't. But I won't be a party to launching her on a voyage which might end in absolute shipwreck. A professional career in art or literature—don't be angry, Dora,—is not in most cases, and certainly not in Victoria's case, irrevocable. Marriage would be utterly irrevocable; and some day,"—he paused momentarily, and his eyes grew stern, even sad,—"the shipwreck would come, for—Victoria is my child. Her heart is asleep, Dora,—for God's sake leave it so, or, at any rate, don't let us run the risk of making its awakening a pain and a sin."

The keen face of the woman beside him looked suddenly lined and grieved. She knew very well to what he alluded.

It was all over and done now, many a year ago. One to whom it had been so much was lying in

her grave, but the remembrance of it never left *her*. She looked into her companion's face with a sad scrutiny.

"You," she said slowly, "you still remember."

His face looked drawn.

"Dora, there is nothing on earth so easy as to make a hash of one's happiness. My poor mother did it for me effectually; need I tell you the result?"

"Victoria," she returned, "is like you. Your wife's honour was safe in your hands, and her husband's honour would be safe in hers."

He smiled, a little, bitter, wintry smile of sheer impatience.

"Honour," he repeated, "honour! Oh, yes, it held out; but—God knows how long it would have held out if—she had lived." He paused. When he spoke again his voice was clearer and less moved. "Now can you not understand, Dora? Don't you see that I dare not, with a temperament like Victoria's, take any other course? With the other girls" (he alluded to his elder daughters) "it did very well, but Victoria is Victoria, and God forbid that I should repeat my mother's mistake with her!"

"But this career! this absurd, preposterous notion of a professional career? I hate it, George! What has your daughter to do with such things?"

"Providence, Dora, I assure you, took no pains to ascertain my wishes on the subject before making me the father of an artist."

"Tut!" with a swift return of her old manner; "let her be an artist as much as she pleases, in private—insist upon its being in private."

"Ah! that is precisely what an artist can never

be. Your artist, Dora, pants for notoriety, popularity, fame."

"I have no patience with such *panting* in a woman: in a man, I suppose——"

"Then a woman should not be an artist?"

"No," said the old lady, popping beautifully into the trap.

"Dora," said her tempter, with inimitable gravity, "you really should have been the author of the universe and the creator of its creatures."

"Sneer if you like," she retorted, "and as much as you like, but no man ever yet got Dora Payne to see that black was white. I suppose I am out of the way of the world. I am an old woman who, thank God, was brought up in an age which had some respect left for the decencies of life. In these days I find myself completely at fault. No good ever came yet of men and women deliberately renouncing that station of life to which it has pleased God to call them. Oh! you may smile. I daresay it's very amusing indeed to hear an old woman repeating the Catechism; only I happen to *believe* in the Catechism, and it seems to me that the young men and women of the present day will go anywhere and do anything except their duty in that state of life in which God has placed them."

He smiled broadly, with the warm good-humour which had made for him many friends and preserved him from almost a single enemy. Nothing pleased him better than a war of words with this redoubtable kinswoman, whose tongue was as a sharp sword while her heart was as a silken cushion.

"My dear Dora!"

"Don't 'my dear Dora' me!"

"Very well, I won't, then. Only let me remind you that, admirable as your contention is, were it carried to its logical conclusion—its *logical* conclusion, Dora—the world would have been deprived of some of its greatest sons and daughters, some of its noblest treasures in every branch of human knowledge."

"Human knowledge," remarked this dreadful old lady, with a perversity of which perhaps only a vigorous feminine mind could be capable, "is well enough in its way, but there are better things than human knowledge. No, you *won't* persuade me! Go and tell the House of Commons that black is white, and evil is good, and I have no doubt it will believe you, that it will be delighted to believe you. But I say, and will always say, that for your daughter to deliberately enter upon a mode of life for which Providence plainly never intended her, thereby to satisfy the caprice or the craving of an unhealthy ambition, is wrong, inexcusable, improper in the highest degree. There, I have done. I daresay"—her voice changed suddenly—"I have said too much. I am laying down the law where I have no business to lay it down. But the child is very dear to me." The break in her voice touched him.

"Look here, Dora," he said gently, "I agree with you in part. But you will not misunderstand me when I say that the ruling principles of one age do not always meet the requirements of another. When you and I were young, and looked at life as the present generation look at it to-day, our *milieu*, so to speak, was entirely different. The tide of existence has now set in another direction. The best

we can do is to fit our young people to sail with it. I won't say that it is better or worse than its predecessor, only that it is different. But it is so, and the generation of to-day must reckon with it. The barriers of civilisation and social conditions have widened, and are widening more and more; and after all, if civilisation was to be true to its name, if it was to really justify its existence, this must be so. Victoria—to come back from the general to the particular, because that is what concerns us most nearly—is a child of the age, emphatically and perhaps typically so. My other children are not. Edmund belongs to the old order, which you would fain keep within the old rigid boundaries. Perhaps that is a good thing as he is my eldest son, although——" He paused.

"Edmund," interposed his hearer, "is a respectable noodle; and his wife is a prig—a female prig—starched too, but not blue!"

Mr. Leathley laughed.

Bravo, my cousin! give a woman time, and she will be certain to turn upon her most cherished convictions. I mean to give Victoria time to do likewise. She may, or she may not. But it seems to me, as far as my human foresight can predicate, that in allowing her to pursue to the utmost the career which her exceptional talents clearly mark out for her, I am, at all events, giving her at least one domain in which happiness can be secured. As to social barriers, Dora, I don't care one jot for social barriers in comparison with Victoria's welfare. Social barriers are all very well,—I will go farther, they are very necessary,—but social barriers were made for man, not man for social barriers."

His cousin and friend flung out her hands with a gesture of despair which so tickled her companion that he laughed till he shook, and the tears stood in his eyes.

"When you come to actual perversion of Scripture I think it is time for me to say no more. Well, George, you may be right or you may be wrong—much more likely; but right or wrong, I say again, I hope Victoria appreciates her father. I don't suppose she does. It would be too old-fashioned a duty or a virtue for a child of the age. But she *ought*. If she doesn't I daresay it's your own fault."

He gave an odd shrug of his little square, stout shoulders.

"Ah, I never could manage the heavy-father business, Dora. As Hugh would say, I'm not built that way."

"George, upon my word, you have never known right from wrong since you joined those *blackguard* Liberals!"

"Oh, Aunt Doll!" exclaimed Victoria's voice behind them, "what a very, *very*——you know! I am perfectly shocked. In *my* young days, Aunt Doll——"

"How dare you!" said Aunt Doll, frowning at her. "Humph! in my young days, and in my old ones too, there were and are *blackguard* Liberals."

She repeated it with the intense relish of one who enjoys to the full that which is neither lawful nor ladylike.

"*Blackguard* Liberals!"

She said it once more; and as she did so she looked from Victoria to Victoria's father, and smiled with childlike delight.

CHAPTER IX.

THEY formed a somewhat silent trio as they entered the house together.

Mr. Leathley and his cousin were thinking of their past conversation, while Victoria was pursuing a course of induction which led her with little difficulty to conclude that her two companions had been talking about herself. It further led to the conjecture that one of them would have somewhat to say to her before she took her departure. Nor was she at fault.

Dora Payne, as she called herself,—Miss Payne, of Farmley, as the world called her,—had a good deal which she wished to say to Victoria: that Victoria would not be especially willing to hear it was a trifling consideration, which would not for an instant stand in the way of its utterance.

Accordingly, they no sooner reached the hall than the elder woman turned to Victoria.

"Let us go into the conservatory," she said rather abruptly, "you and I. I have not seen the chrysanthemums yet."

Mr. Leathley shot a glance at his daughter. There was a brief flash of amusement in it. "Your turn now," it seemed to say to her.

Victoria led the way obediently into the blue drawing-room. She knew that any attempt to defer the coming ordeal would be as futile as it would be

ridiculous. She knew also, or fancied so, that she was a match for her adversary.

Mrs. Edmund Leathley, who was writing a note at her own special escritoire in the corner, looked up as they entered the room.

"Won't you come to the fire?" she said politely to Miss Payne. She was very much afraid of that tall old lady, but she was also, she believed, very cognisant of her own duties.

"Thank you, my dear Gertrude," was the reply, "but Victoria is going to show me the chrysanthemums."

Victoria's sister-in-law returned to the composition of her letter. Victoria, with the feeling that the world contains many excellent persons whose range of vision is so limited as to prevent them seeing an inch beyond their own noses, accompanied her visitor in silence.

"Now, Aunt Doll, if you come down here you will see the new pink cluster which he is so proud of."

Victoria spoke hurriedly, indicating the spot with her finger at the same time.

"My darling child, never mind the pink cluster. It can wait. I am going to have a little talk with you first."

This was horribly disingenuous; or perhaps it would be more correct to say that this was horribly ingenuous, because, as a strategist, Aunt Doll was clumsy, to say the least of it.

Victoria smiled with resignation.

"Do sit down," she said pleadingly; "you positively *must* sit down, because you are looking so judicial, Aunt Doll, that to sit in judgment is indispensable."

This, the second and feebler effort at diversion, succeeded no better than its predecessor.

Aunt Doll sat down promptly in a Madeira chair, beside a marble Aphrodite.

She caught Victoria's hands in her own, and pulled her over to her, in front of her knees.

"Stand still!" she exclaimed imperiously; and she gave her a little shake, as she had done many a time before, in the days when Victoria wore pinafores, and got into scrapes. "I have been talking to your father about you."

Victoria smiled.

"Oh, it's all very fine to smile, my dear, but smiles don't excuse anything."

"I will try to excuse everything," returned Victoria, "if you think it would be any good."

The elder woman looked up into the delicate smiling face with a strange pathos in her own hard features.

"Ah, you young people, you young people! you laugh us to scorn, and tell us to take our advice to—to—*Jericho*. I wonder you are not ashamed of yourself,"—her hands tightened round Victoria's with a pressure that was half a caress,—"but you are mad, yes! you are—mad with pride, and vainglory, and nonsensical inflation. So," with an abrupt change of tone, "you think you are going to be happy for ever and ever? Child, God help you!"

Victoria's small dark head executed a sort of scornful toss.

"You dear Aunt Doll, I don't know that I quite think anything of the sort."

"That's a lie, my dear," returned this plain-spoken old woman sharply. "Every young person upon this

earth thinks of being happy, and dreams of being happy, and is even persuaded that she is going to be happy some day—that perfect happiness *is* possible in this weary world. Oh, what it is to be young! At least, that is what the young people in *my* young days thought. Perhaps the young people of the present day think differently. All sorts of unnatural conditions prevail nowadays."

"I fancy," said Victoria, "that in the present day we don't as a rule put personal happiness altogether in the first place—at least, in the old-fashioned 'love and marriage' sense."

It was grandiloquent, this speech, and it was delivered with a certain feminine flutter of the eyelids which might have been effective with any auditor but the present one.

The old lady in the Madeira chair released her young companion's hands, and threw herself back upon the cushions. Resting her elbows on the wicker arms of her chair, she joined the tips of her handsome well-cared-for old fingers together and raising her eyebrows significantly exclaimed,—

"Hoity, toity, fol de riddle ido!"

It was a disconcerting response, or would have been to most persons. But the future artiste's self-possession was apparently proof against disconcertion. She smiled once more.

"My dear Aunt Doll, I am afraid you and I look at things from a different point of view. Suppose we agree to differ?"

Her voice sounded cool, politely cool.

The old woman's face changed. She looked up with a puzzled, wistful scrutiny.

"You are so cool, so calculating, so self-centred,

you young people," she said musingly, "I don't understand you."

Victoria laughed pleasantly. She drew over another chair and sat down beside her old friend.

"It's very dear of you, Aunt Doll, to bother about my affairs, only don't be down on me because I don't seem to find my *métier* in running round like the little pigs in the old song, crying out, 'Who'll eat me? who'll eat me?' Now—now—now," as an ejaculation savouring of dissent came from her friend, "this is what you're driving at, Aunt Doll. Unfortunately, you see, I don't seem to see it. I really have no desire to furnish a meal, like the little pigs. On the contrary, I mean to have a meal on my own account, *all* to myself."

"I hope it will agree with you," interposed her auditor shortly.

Victoria laughed again.

"Sounds greedy, doesn't it? Well, I must take my chance. That is what I want—my chance, and I mean to have it. Every English man has always had his chance, and every English woman is going to have hers now. Turn about is fair play, you know, Aunt Doll."

"Is it?" returned Aunt Doll grimly. "There was a proverb that my mother was very fond of quoting: 'Those that live longest will see most.' We'll see, Victoria,—or *you'll* see, more likely."

Victoria patted the hand lying nearest to her own.

"I *love* you, Aunt Doll," she said caressingly.

"Victoria," returned her redoubtable opponent, "keep your nonsense for a better occasion."

Victoria smiled.

"Poor dear!" she said softly, with another little pat. "Look here, Aunt Doll,"—the tone of her voice changed completely—"I can't stand the eternal dawdle any longer. Upon my word, I'd rather play the fiddle for three pounds a week in Kensington Town Hall. After all, it would be doing *something*."

Miss Payne drummed her fingers on the arms of her chair.

"So you require a *sphere*?" she said sarcastically. "My dear, pray take a husband."

"Aunt Doll, you are too perfectly delicious for words. I adore your plain-speaking. A husband is just what I don't mean to take. Why *should* I?"

"Why should you *not*?" was the dry retort. "I fail to see why *you* should escape."

Victoria grinned with intense appreciation.

"Oh, you perfect darling!" she exclaimed enthusiastically. "Why are you not a man? and I'd marry you to-morrow."

"I am excessively obliged to you," said the old lady.

Victoria laughed delightedly. Her old friend looked at her.

"Well, my dear child, you are very secure in your own wisdom." She spoke gravely, but the ironical inflexion lingered in her deliberate, downright accents. "You have spent twenty-five years in this world, and you imagine that you have plucked the heart out of the mystery of life. When I was your age, I imagined much the same thing, so I forgive you; but I am sorry for you. You want to do, and you expect to be able to do, what no man or woman ever yet was able to do—you want to arrange your

life entirely in accordance with your own will. You believe, as so many young persons have always believed, that you can do this and that, you will never make a mistake, or that, if you should make a mistake, the mistake won't matter. Your desire to become a professional violinist is a part of this."

Victoria uttered an exclamation.

Miss Payne smiled coldly.

"Oh, yes,"—she raised her hand as she spoke to compel silence,—"the new order of young woman has found a panacea for all earthly ills, an infallible recipe for all earthly happiness. She is wrong. She will be no happier in the new world of her own creating than in the old world which God created for her.

Victoria bit her lip. She looked bored. As her cousin's words ceased she raised her eyes and her eyebrows carelessly.

"Happiness,"—she laughed slightly as she repeated it,—"how you people do go on about *happiness*! In *your* day, Aunt Doll, did they *never* think of anything else?"

The face of the elder woman flushed quickly. A little pink glow came up into the faded cheeks.

"I am not aware, Victoria, that I have said or done anything to deserve insolence."

Her voice was icy. She rose from her chair and drew her mantle about her shoulders.

Victoria jumped up impulsively. In a moment her arms went round her friend.

"Darling, I didn't mean anything of the sort, believe me."

She pressed her cheek coaxingly against the old lady's neck and looked up into her face.

"*Dear* Aunt Doll, you don't mean to say you are going to be vexed with *me*? Oh, you *sha'n't* be vexed with me!"

"I should like to know, I should *very* much like to know," Miss Payne here observed with calm deliberation, "what Jerry Annesley would give to be in my place at this moment?"

A flicker of something that looked very like malice shone, as she said it, in the keen old eyes which rested on the slim swaying figure whose encircling arms were still clinging to her. No doubt she was an incorrigible old lady.

Victoria frowned unmistakably, and the clinging pressure of her arms relaxed somewhat.

"You are a very naughty old lady indeed! Imagine saying things like that, Aunt Doll! I shall blush, in a minute."

"*Indeed*, my dear! Don't trouble yourself with anything so out of date. Tut!"—her tone changed again,—"you know, as well as I do, that the man is infatuated about you—poor fool!"

"Which is the fool," inquired Victoria softly, "I, or the man?"

Miss Payne shook her head impatiently, but her lips twitched.

"Aunt Doll," proceeded the cool impertinent tones, "as Carter used to say long ago in the nursery, *now* the fat's in the fire."

She paused; Miss Payne said nothing.

Victoria's eyes grew graver. She looked up into the sharp frowning face above her own. Her fingers fiddled nervously with the fringe on her cousin's mantle as she spoke.

"It's no good to badger me," she said quickly, "no

good, not one little bit. Jerry is an excellent creature, and he has been ever so dear and nice and all that, but it is quite another thing to marry him."

She was pale, but she uttered Annesley's name with no more emotion than she would have uttered that of the marble Aphrodite in front of her.

"You have refused him?" said her companion, at once.

The clear pallor of Victoria's face showed a little colour under the skin. Once more she frowned unmistakably.

"Is that a fair question?" she returned coolly.

"Well, perhaps not," admitted Miss Payne, with equal coolness, "but you've answered it"

A cold, black shadow came into Victoria's small dark eyes. She was silent.

Miss Payne, watching her, sighed. Into her eyes there crept a look of bewilderment. She drew Victoria closer to her.

"It is my turn now to ask you not to be vexed with me—with an old woman who loves you."

She spoke gently, very gently indeed, for her.

The girl's lips parted slightly in a little smile. But the shadow remained in her eyes.

Miss Payne sighed again. She knew that when that cold, steady arrogance shone in Victoria's eyes it meant a difficult time for whoever had brought it there.

"Well, dear child, are you going to be angry with me after all?"

"I am not angry," replied Victoria; she spoke slowly; "but you misunderstand me. It is hopeless, I think, trying to make you understand."

She paused, shrugged her shoulders, and laughed.

"Oh, don't you see, *can't* you see, what this is to me?" There was a sudden passionate break in her voice, contrasting vividly with its tone hitherto. "Why am I to be driven away from the music which is my *life*? Why am I to be denied the chance of making something out of the one really good thing in my whole nature? Because, indeed, some commonplace man imagines that he would like to marry me. For *that* I am to fling everything dearest to me to the four winds of heaven, and make a humble curtsey, and thank his lordship for his kindness in asking me to share his commonplace existence. Oh, I don't blame you"—her eyes flashed—"how can I blame you, when for age after age the one cant cry has been dinned and dinned and dinned into every woman's ear, and every girl's ear, from the moment that she is able to understand it? Marriage, marriage, marriage! Marry *well* if you can, but marry some one, any one, by all means. And you wonder *why* men are conceited, overbearing, selfish."

A little smile curled her lips.

"I have the greatest admiration for men. I do not know how they are as decent as they are, with the husband-hunter ever behind them in full cry. I assure you it is the eighth wonder of the world to me."

"*Very* sweeping assertions," said Miss Payne's incisive accents.

Victoria looked full into her old friend's eyes. Her own face grew colder and harder.

"You remember old Mr. Fotheringay of Court Marten?" she said abruptly. "He had seven

daughters, you know. Every year on the first of May he took one daughter to London for two months. Some one asked his coachman—it was before the days of railways—where his master's travelling carriage was bound for. 'London,' said the coachman; 'we're taking cattle up to Smithfield. Please God, we'll get a good sale before we come back.'"

"I've heard that story before," said her auditor, coldly.

"You'll probably hear it again," returned Victoria, with a laugh that had a sneer in it.

Miss Payne closed her lips.

Victoria's face flushed a little.

"Can't you laugh, Aunt Doll? I've told that story to innumerable people, and it made them all laugh."

"Did it, my dear? You must have felt very gratified."

Victoria came closer to her.

"How very, *very* horrid you can be, Aunt Doll!" She looked quite humble as she said it, but her eyes were very dark and cold.

The old lady smiled faintly.

"Your philosophy of life," she said, looking at Victoria steadily, "is very comprehensive, no doubt, from your point of view. But you have left something out of it, Victoria."

She paused.

"Have I, Aunt Doll?"

"Yes, my dear."

"What?"

"Love."

"Oh, no, Aunt Doll, only marriage."

The sharp, faded eyes flashed.

"My dear, I bow before the wisdom of to-day. As to the cleverness of to-day, it is dazzling. Take care, Victoria,"—her voice changed again,—"don't meddle with edged tools."

"Ah, that is precisely what I am trying to avoid. You are scarcely consistent, Aunt Doll."

"Indeed?" said the old lady curtly.

"Love," repeated Victoria musingly, "love, love, love! It sounds a good deal, but it isn't *much*, only a peg to hang marriage on. No, it isn't even that much, in most instances."

Miss Payne leaned her hand on the back of the Madeira chair.

"I trust," she said, "that you may never know better."

Victoria laughed.

"How dear of you, Aunt Doll! No, don't be angry. We're mixing up two things, you and I, love and marriage. They haven't much to do with one another nowadays."

"Cheap cynicism," said her companion quickly, "is the current coin of the chatter which calls itself conversation, *nowadays*."

Victoria shrugged her shoulders.

"Let us leave love where it is, *out* of it, as it is generally, Aunt Doll, and stick to the marriage question,—my marriage, if you like."

Miss Payne looked at her once more.

"It's all so commonplace," continued Victoria contemptuously, "horribly commonplace,—the eligible young man and the grateful alacrity of the properly-brought-up young woman. And I am to give up *Music* and freedom in order to add another couple to the commonplace list. Oh, no,

Aunt Doll. Thanks a thousand times, but no all the same. I'm *so* sorry I can't fall in love with it all! if I could only manage *that* (it's so appropriate, to *fall* in love) I really would be happy to oblige you. But I can't. They say we must needs love the best when we see it. In that case I suppose I ought to be madly in love with Jerry. Poor old Jerry! He's a dear good old thing, but oh! how commonplace it would be!"

"I am sixty-five years old," remarked her companion, "but my experience of goodness has not been so fortunate as yours. I have not met goodness so constantly as to find it at all commonplace."

She pushed the Madeira chair aside as she finished speaking, walked across the conservatory, and lifted the blue-and-silver brocade of the portière. The blue drawing-room was empty. Mrs. Edmund Leathley had gone out driving with Mrs. St. John.

Miss Payne turned to Victoria, who had followed her

"Perhaps," she said formally, "you would kindly order my phaeton."

Victoria rang the bell and gave the order. Her companion threw herself into a deep soft chair. Victoria turned aside into one of the windows, and stood there looking out into the Dutch garden.

Both ladies started when the respectfully modulated accents of Duckett from the corner of the screen announced that "Miss Payne's carriage" was at the door.

The owner of "Miss Payne's carriage" looked up. The girl standing in the window looked round. The glance of each met midway in the wide old room. But neither spoke. Duckett retired as noiselessly as he entered.

A live coal from the fire dropped suddenly on the blue tiles under the grate. The small sharp crash caused a soft black ball that was lying on the rug to unroll slowly. The form of William the Conqueror disclosed itself. His portly presence raised itself upon his four legs. He stood erect, humped his broad back, curved his tail, and yawned so widely that every white tooth in his pink gleaming gums shone like glistening porcelain. In one deliberate survey he took in the room and its occupants. Without a shadow of hesitation, he skipped nimbly, with his tail pointing upwards, across to where the old lady was sitting in the low chair. Uttering a sharp, decisive cry, he popped into her lap, and began rubbing his square head up and down against her breast.

"Ah, King Billy," said Miss Payne, tickling his ears, "you never desert me!"

Once more the eyes of the two women, the young and the old, met midway across the room.

The younger woman crossed the room, and with a sudden quick impulse sank on her knees beside the chair which held her two favourites. She put her little firm white hands into the old woman's lap, considerably inconveniencing William the Conqueror, by so doing.

"Aunt Doll,"—her voice was quick, but it was less cold than usual,—"isn't it much ado about nothing?"

Miss Payne smiled. Then she sighed.

Victoria pressed her hands farther down into her friend's lap, and looked longer into the piercing light eyes. The face of the elder woman relaxed in spite of itself. In another minute or two she smiled quite broadly.

"You are a spoilt child," she said curtly, in her downright decisive manner,—"yes, you are; don't dare to contradict me, madam! Have your own way, my dear. But perhaps before you are as old as I am you may discover, as many a woman has discovered before this, that a good comfortable marriage cuts the black knot of a woman's difficulties in the only way that is really effectual or really permanent. As I said before, have your own way. Only be sure you don't throw away the substance for the shadow. You may be a great artist one of these days, you may conquer the world, or drive the world before you; there is nothing, they *say*, that a woman nowadays cannot accomplish; she can even unsex herself, so powerful has she grown nowadays; but *you*, whatever you may or may not become, *you* will remain a woman!"

Victoria laughed.

"Oh, how do you know, Aunt Doll?"

"I know, my dear, by that which the young women of the present day are doing their best to denude themselves of, my woman's instinct."

She raised her hand to the back of Victoria's head, and, drawing Victoria's face closer to her own, kissed her twice on the cheek.

"I must go," she added, and she rose slowly from her chair, and tipped William the Conqueror out of her lap.

When she had seated herself in the phaeton, and as Victoria, standing in the wind, was fastening the leather apron round her, with her own hands, she said abruptly,—

"Tell Jerry Annesley, with my love, that whenever he chooses to find his way over he will find a

welcome awaiting him at Farmley. He will come, although he is a young man, and I have nothing to offer him but an old woman in a big lonely old house. When you discover another man like Jerry Annesley, be sure you let me know. Now, good-bye. Don't fiddle the flesh off your bones completely, you will by no means enhance your charms, or your chances of success with the public, by presenting yourself before them as an anatomical specimen of *bones*. Let go his head, Thomas."

Victoria stood in the portico and watched the clumsy old phaeton as it rumbled down the avenue, carrying its owner back to the home that was indeed a lonely one.

Once upon a time Farmley was a great house. Once upon a time the Paynes of Farmley were a fine family. But times change, and the fortunes of fine families change with them.

The old woman in her shabby phaeton was the last of her family and of her father's house, and she had fallen on evil days. The story of her life would be the story of a past, dead as Queen Anne: a past having nothing to do with the present.

Only, under the old trees in Farmley Park, and through the great faded, worn-out rooms, wandered those children of the past, pale phantoms of happier days, whose lot it is to re-people the waste places, and fill up the desert paths, so long as this world and its inhabitants shall continue to be the victims of Time and Circumstance.

CHAPTER X.

ANNESLEY'S crumb of pleasure was almost consumed.

Only a few hours were left of his stay at Eastaston. His visit had been, with the exception of one incident, little different to many another pleasant sojourn which he had spent under the same roof. Nevertheless, at the close of this, it seemed to Annesley that he had reached a point when a definite end would be put to a certain definite thing. It seemed to him that his intercourse with Victoria would henceforth be less satisfactory, from his point of view, even than it had been hitherto—although, hitherto, from his point of view, much had been left out that he would fain have included in it.

Yet now, when, as he believed, the end of it all was come, he would gladly have recalled the past years.

These bright, sunshiny days of late autumn, when Eastaston was such a pleasant house to find oneself in, were dark days to him, because he felt more and more, as each one slipped by, that Victoria was going away from him, and that once these days were ended, the best of his intercourse with her would be ended also.

He began to realise now, for the first time, something of what she had meant when she told him

that he himself, and his love, and his life, were quite *outside* her life. He began to see that her thoughts, her hopes, her aims, even her very self were really shut away from him, and that between her life and his a gulf yawned which not all his love, nor all his patience, nor all his endeavour, could by any means bridge over.

He carried a dull, disappointed heart out with his gun in these days; but as he carried also a face which was ruddy and healthy, and perhaps commonplace, no one, except, it might be, a certain sharp-eyed old woman, away in her big, lonely rooms at Farmley, had anything like a true conception of how matters were with him.

When a man is still on the fair side of forty; when he is the possessor of health and strength, and a desirable paternal estate, and a comfortable amount of funded property; when he is a keen sportsman, and, *primâ facie*, enjoys his dinner; above all, when Nature has bestowed upon him an external appearance indicative of sense rather than sensibility,—it is difficult for his fellow-beings to credit him with certain feelings which they in general hazily associate with poets, painters, and defective physique.

A man who seems most at home in buckskin leggings, and devotes at least two-thirds of his existence to the claims of "sport," can scarcely expect Society to regard him as a fit and proper person for commiseration.

In justice to Annesley, it must be said that he had no sort of desire that Society should do anything of the kind. His favourite aspiration was that he might get through the world quietly; meaning thereby, that he had no wish to obtrude

himself or his affairs in any marked degree upon its notice. He had certainly lived up to his favourite aspiration, as perhaps but few persons rarely succeed in doing. But then, for all public positions or functions which entailed the public display of him, FitzGerald Annesley, he had the most profound aversion.

It was quite in keeping with the ironic humour of the Fate which has under its care the love affairs of mankind, that such a man as FitzGerald Annesley should desire to have such a woman as Victoria Leathley.

But he was not to have Victoria Leathley, however much he might desire it; that, at least, was plain to himself. Victoria was going away from him, away into a great *terra incognita*, a land of which he and men like him are profoundly ignorant. It seemed to him, as he stood and watched her, that the parting was such as to leave him absolutely nothing to look forward to.

It never occurred to him to reproach Victoria even in thought, or to resent her absolutely undisguised indifference to himself, or her equally undisguised inability to recognise all that she was to him. If he thought of her side of the matter at all, it was only to tell himself that she was no more to blame for it, or for failing to realise the pain of his position, than she was to blame because her eyes were brown instead of blue. If Victoria did not love him, could not love him, would not even allow him to love her, would not accept his love, the fault or the misfortune was his. All he had to do was to discover, if might be, where, and in what, his defects in her eyes were to be found,

and at the same time to find a remedy for them, and apply it.

Yet just now it seemed to him that even this laudable undertaking was little better than useless How could he make himself gracious in her eyes, if her eyes were not to see him? Had the width of the globe been put between them he could not have felt more completely divided, more cut off from her, than by this new life upon which she was about to enter. It seemed to assure him that here, her heart, and eyes, and faculties would be so pre-occupied, and so encompassed, as to shut him and his concerns totally out of her range of vision.

Music, henceforth, was to have her for its own. He did not blame Music; he only, with weary, but quite unconscious, humour, envied it. Nevertheless, he could not put it into its proper place in the affair. How could he, when to him it was, on the whole, a more or less soothing accompaniment to slumber?

At the same time, he was capable of realising that a woman who can accomplish the exceedingly difficult task of playing the violin, and who can, in addition, accomplish that exceedingly difficult task exceedingly well, will (in accordance with the nature of woman in the present age) certainly desire to win as much applause for the doing of it, and as much notoriety—only she would call it fame—as the world is willing to give to the few who can do what the many find impossible. Perhaps this was as much as a man of Annesley's calibre could be expected to understand of the rationale of ambition, in a woman like Victoria. He understood

clearly enough, however, that it menaced his wishes. Would it not take her away from him? At that moment, this was the dominant note in his setting of the future: it would take her away from him.

The evening before he left they were playing bézique for four, after dinner. At least, he was playing; but Victoria was among those who were not. She was sitting by herself under a big palm, beside a shaded lamp, reading a book which was making her frown a good deal.

Annesley watched her from the card-table. He was not an imaginative man as a rule, yet to-night, by some reflex action on the part of such imagination as he did possess, he was enabled to draw, from their relative positions at the moment, a parable of their future lives.

"He," as he expressed it to himself, "with the herd, fooling on after this or that triviality or nonsense. She, far away from him, as unconcerned apparently about him, or his pursuits, as if he simply did not exist."

"Confound Edmund!" he growled to himself. "How he laughs, that chap, like an infernal coster-monger!"

Victoria glanced up as her eldest brother's anything but melodious laughter rang through the room. In her eyes, which it was obvious scarcely saw the others, there was yet an expression which hurt Annesley. He was easily hurt at that moment. His thoughts were unusually bitter, for him.

"Oh, hang it all!" he thought. "What a pack of roaring jackasses she must think us!"

"I say," he exclaimed abruptly, at the conclusion of the first hand, "can't somebody else come in? I've

got a head like a turnip since that long fag yesterday. Here, Keppel," pushing back his chair, and catching that young gentleman by the arm, "you come in, old chap. Do you good, my boy. Relaxation clears a great brain, and gives a what-d'ye-call-it to a great literary style."

Conway Keppel paused. He had been out of the room, and had at that moment only entered it. He surveyed the card-table, and Annesley; then he looked at Victoria, away under the palm. He screwed his eye-glass into his eye with extreme deliberation, but made no reply.

"Here," said Jerry, standing up without more ado; "here's my chair."

"You're extremely kind," responded Mr. Keppel, in his cool, smooth accents.

"Shove along," said Annesley, more cheerfully.

The younger man "shoved along" accordingly with uncommon good humour.

There was a momentary pause in the game. Edmund Leathley, with one arm flung over the back of his chair, which he had tilted to an acute angle, was telling his father a story, understood to be funny. Edmund Leathley delighted in telling good stories. Perhaps it would be more correct to say that he delighted in yelling them.

His way of telling, or yelling, good stories was familiar to most of his relations and friends.

No human being ever heard much more of one of Edmund Leathley's stories than his father was hearing at the present moment.

"My dear sir," he was ejaculating, "it was the most *screamingly* funny—he, he, he! ha, ha, ha! ho, ho!" —a gasp and a gulp—"Such a rippin'—oho!—o!—

Of all the—ha, ha!—haaa!—joke—you ever saw! Devilish good—ha, ha, ha!—the old boy himself couldn't have looked more—he, he, he! Oh! the best thing!"

The remainder was lost in choking spasms of stentorian laughter and coughing.

Mr. Leathley sat with his legs crossed, and the smile upon his face which might be expected of a man who had himself acquired the reputation of a finished raconteur.

Conway Keppel was all the time quietly talking to himself.

Jerry Annesley, after turning himself round and round in the middle of the room like a dying tee-to-tum, had now got down on a three-legged stool at Victoria's feet.

Conway Keppel's eyes stared over the top of his cards at Mrs. St. John.

"The Dis-improvement of the Human Race," he murmured impressively, while Edmund Leathley's paroxysms of mirth and coughing were still making the candles flutter, "is the one hope left; specially the Dis-improvement of Marriage. Of all things let us set about the Dis-improvement of Marriage. Salvation"—he nodded slowly—"salvation lies that way."

Mrs. St. John confided to a dear friend whom she met in Scotland the following week, her conviction that that clever Mr. Keppel was a very odd young man. "Doubtless," she added, "it arose from being so talented, and writing for the newspapers and that sort of thing. She had heard a doctor say once that great literary men are all mad!"

So easily can a young man make a reputation now.

CHAPTER XI.

"WELL?" inquired Victoria, looking up from her book, as Jerry got down on the three-legged stool.

"Oh, nothing," responded Annesley, with refreshing lucidity. "I mean"—and he wriggled on the stool so that it creaked, which was natural—"I don't mean to stay—at least, I don't want to interrupt you. I only want a bit o' peace and quietness. Edmund is kicking up such a howling row over there, and my head is simply thumping like an eight-day clock."

"No, is it really?" said Victoria. She shut up her book at once, and flung it on a chair close by. Her manner changed instantly and completely.

"A headache," pursued Annesley, as if he believed it incumbent on him to apologise for bringing under her notice anything so presuming on his part as a headache, "knocks one all to—to pieces."

But if he had said a heartache, he might have been, at any rate, quite as near the mark.

Victoria was looking at him critically; so critically and so kindly, as one might look at a sick child, that he began to feel his face growing hot.

"You're not a headachy person," she said. "What do you generally do for yourself?"

"Nothing," replied Annesley humbly. But he experienced all at once a passing amelioration of

the conditions of existence. That she should take his headache under her care was extraordinarily gratifying.

"You are so stupid," said Victoria, looking at him languidly, and leaning back a little more comfortably in her chair. "I do not think there can be on earth any creature quite so utterly stupid as man."

He smiled. He was not in the least offended. He had, in point of fact, now reached to such a deplorable condition that so long as she let him sit there close to her, and look at her, while she in return looked at him, he was almost incapable of being offended by anything that she might choose to say. On the contrary, it seemed to please him that she should declare him to be the most stupid of all created creatures.

"What's good for a headache?" he inquired, with praiseworthy desire to improve.

Victoria laughed as she looked at him. "Oh, good gracious! what a question! Any amount of things are good for a headache; but really, you know—headaches are so—so different, that naturally the remedies vary a good deal also. By the way, I know Gertrude has a 'Family Physician,' or an 'Every one his own Doctor,' somewhere about. Shall I ask her to fetch it for you?"

"Thanks so much. I once tried 'Every one his own Doctor.' My experience was that it ought to be called 'Every one his own Undertaker.' It's uncommonly like Lady Somebody Something's 'Nice Little Shilling Dinners.'"

"'Every Lady's Guide to her own Cooking Range,'" put in Victoria gently.

"Death at twenty yards," finished Annesley solemnly.

"Well, I think," said Victoria, with an amount of sympathy that ought to have been gratifying, "that *something* should be done for you at once. You are apparently very ill."

"My hectic colour," returned the object of her remarks, "is deceptive. It might lead the casual observer to suppose,—to *erroneously* suppose—that I was in the enjoyment of rude health."

Victoria laughed softly.

"Do you contemplate an entry into public life, as the newspapers say?"

"*Me!*" said Annesley.

"Ah, that's better," she observed tranquilly—"more like yourself. When you got grammatical it alarmed me, but I fancied you might be preparing for public speaking. As you say you are not, I fear it must be, as the doctors would say, symptomatic of abnormal disturbance of the brain."

She spoke softly, but with her usual rapidity, and with a certain intonation in which humour was faintly discoverable. This she had inherited from her father. When Victoria was in this mood Annesley told himself, certainly for not less than the hundred and fifty thousandth time, that the man did not live who could be other than helpless in her hands. He could do nothing but look at her, as he sat on the three-legged stool with his arms and his legs crossed.

"I wonder," continued Victoria's short, sweet accents, "if I should find it good treatment for a headache to sit on a horrid little knobby, carved stool in the attitude of a Japanese idol. I hardly think so, on the whole, you know."

But she would have found it difficult to drive him away just then.

In a few hours, indeed, would he not be far enough away from her? These poor minutes were all that were left to him now. While he was laughing at her ironical impertinences, the remembrance of this flashed vividly before him, and the laughter died in his face, if his lips still curved themselves into something resembling a smile.

Victoria, whose dark, cold eyes let very little pass them unobserved, saw this, and saw the sudden blanching of his face, under the sunburn of his cheeks and chin.

"All the same," she said quickly, and the tone of her voice changed with equal quickness, "I do believe you have got a bad headache."

As she said it, she raised herself from the luxurious depths of her chair, and leaned towards him.

"Yes, you have, Jerry," she said again; and this time she leaned a little farther forward still—so close to him that the fluttering lace on her bodice almost brushed against him, and the faint, sweet perfume of her hair came close to his face. He felt the pulses of his body throbbing like the beat of a sledge-hammer in his ears. For a moment he couldn't speak.

If Victoria was acting deliberately, she was acting badly, inexcusably. But Victoria was not acting deliberately, in the sense of understanding what a trial her demeanour must have been to him.

She knew certainly that he loved her. But unless he, or some one else, brought the fact directly under her notice, she rarely gave it a thought. She was

not a heartless coquette. The type is perhaps rarer in life than in fiction. But she was a perfectly heart-whole woman, and a woman who, strange as it may seem, had lived to her twenty-fifth year without having even once fallen in love with any man. Perhaps, too, falling in love in life is rarer or more difficult, than in fiction.

Nevertheless, she was not a monster, but a woman who would not have let the meanest creature living suffer pain a moment longer than she could help, did she know of it. Only the pain of love and passion was unknown to her, except, indeed, by hearsay. Now hearsay does not, perhaps unfortunately, form a guide entirely acceptable to the young, clever, modern mind.

This woman's mind was young and modern. She was extremely fond of the man in front of her; she was genuinely anxious to cure his headache.

"Look here, Jerry, dear," she said gently, while Annesley told himself, with an inward storm of rage, that if he let himself go now he would be a graceless cad, "you'd better not go to the smoking-room to-night. If you've got a nervous headache, which I rather think you have—somehow you look like it—the chatter will drive you wild."

"Oh, I'm all right," returned Annesley, almost brusquely; "at least, don't think me awfully rude, but it's nothing, really; it'll be all right to-morrow, I'm sure. Don't bother about it. I say, what I really wanted to know is something about your plans."

"My plans," said Victoria, falling in with his humour, "are pretty well settled. I go up to town next week; and the first step will be the recital at

St. James's Hall on the 27th of November. Say a prayer for me, Jerry, on that day."

"May I come?" said Annesley, in a low tone

Victoria raised her eyebrows.

"Of course you may, but I thought you were going over to Ireland; and won't you be shooting at Kilsallagh just then?"

"I am going to Ireland," replied Annesley; "but I shall turn up in St. James's Hall all the same, never you fear."

Victoria looked a little amused, but she was gratified.

"And then, after that?" he continued.

"The Deluge," she replied promptly. "No," in a different tone. "After that I have one or two engagements already booked, and it depends on the first affair, I suppose, how many more I shall get. We shall be here for Christmas, and then I shall go back to town, and work hard all through next season. I wanted to teach. I should hate it, you know, only that I felt as if I were not doing the thing thoroughly unless I taught; but father simply wouldn't *hear* of it, so I am blocked there. However"—she spoke half absently—"I sha'n't be idle; I shall try it another way."

"I suppose," said Annesley, speaking lightly, to force down the pain which this map of the future was causing him, "that from this out the average man needn't expect to see you again?"

She laughed, and shook her head.

"Nonsense!" she said lightly. "I'm not going into a nunnery."

"The Lord forbid!" interjected Annesley, with fervent and unaffected piety.

"What are you going to do with yourself?" she asked carelessly. She rested her chin on the palm of her left hand, and looked at him as she spoke.

"Same old grind," he replied indifferently. "Castle Connaught and all the rest of it. There's nothing new under the sun—at least, in my case."

"Doing nothing is, apparently, hard work."

She was sorry the instant she said it, which indeed was only in idle thoughtlessness.

Annesley looked extremely hurt. His face flushed up redly.

"We can't all be geniuses," he said, with something as nearly approaching to sullenness as his naturally sweet temper would permit. "I believe"—he spoke warmly—"that you think a chap like me, with no particular brains to speak of, isn't fit to live."

"Oh, don't be perfectly absurd," protested Victoria, smiling at him.

"It's true," he persisted. "You can't care a brass farthing for any one who hasn't intellect and all that. You despise an ordinary chap who isn't clever. You look down on ordinary people. I daresay you're not aware of it, or that you can't help it—that you do it unconsciously; but you do it all the same."

"Rubbish!" was her response. It was uttered perhaps just a little too emphatically. But it is possible that there was a little sting of truth in the accusation; and it is possible, too, that it was not the more agreeable because his very ordinary wits had found it and pointed it out to her.

"Do you know," she said, more quietly—partly to get away from a discussion which could lead to no possible results, and partly to make up to him for

the evident offence her words had unwittingly caused —"I think you must have your hands pretty full at Castle Connaught?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Annesley. "Of course, the place takes a lot of looking after."

He apparently did not think it necessary to add that his view of the process commonly called "looking after a property" was a good deal more comprehensive than that which men of his age and circumstances as a rule are content to take; but perhaps she knew this, or divined it, because she said immediately,—

"I wish everybody was as thorough as you are, Jerry. I assure you it would be a much better world to live in, if they were."

He only uttered a sort of inarticulate exclamation, something between laughter and dissent.

"I'd like to show you the old place," he said quickly. He looked down as he said it, and began elaborately rearranging the ribbon bow on his shoe.

"So you shall," responded Victoria composedly. He glanced up swiftly, as if he did not quite understand her. "I'm always intending to go and see Ireland one of these days. I don't know why I haven't gone before. I know father would have taken me, but then there's always such a lot to do, you know; and Ireland doesn't seem to be on the way to anything," she concluded.

Annesley's face brightened.

"Well, look here," he said eagerly, "you don't come to Ireland without coming to Castle Connaught. Now mind, that's a bargain, Victoria. I'll undertake to show you Ireland a lot better than you'd see it by just fooling round over the hackneyed tourist

tracks—the Lakes of Killarney, and all the rest of it."

"I am sure I should," assented Victoria; "and I shall certainly be delighted to come to Castle Connaught, if you'll have me. We'll settle it—you and I and father—some time next year."

"Oh!" said Jerry. "*Next* year. Well, next year isn't very far off, at any rate."

This was consolatory, and he could feel that there was something left to him.

She smiled, but she neither endorsed nor contradicted his remark.

"I am going to slip away," she said to him, lowering her voice. "There's father moving; I shall just catch him in the hall, and say good-night to him."

She stood up, and Annesley stood up too.

"By the way," she said, picking up her book, "I suppose you've got some eau-de-Cologne?"

"Well, yes," said Annesley.

"All right; put some on your forehead. It's the only thing for a headache like yours. Have you got one of those spray things? No? Well, if you care to come to the foot of the turret stairs I'll fetch you one. Come on; we'll go out by this door."

In the hall they found Mr. Leathley. Victoria went up to him and laid her hand on his shoulder.

"Good-night," she said, kissing him. "What have you got there?" she added calmly, seizing his hand, in which he was holding some newspapers. "The new *Spectator*. Give that to me. No; you may keep the others."

"Well, upon my word," observed her father, "you are a cool hand."

"I'll give it you in the morning," returned his daughter, magnanimously, alluding to the *Spectator*.

She nodded and laughed as she said it, and then she turned to Annesley, and they went off together by the long corridor to the turret. When they reached the latter, Victoria ran up the stairs lightly, and in about five minutes came running down again to Annesley, with something in her hand.

"Now," she said, in a little gasp—she was breathing very quickly from the race—"now, Jerry, look, here it is." She held out her hand as she spoke, with the little glass bottle in it. "Wait." She came nearer. "Do you understand these spray things? See, *this* is how it goes—do you see? Put *lots* of eau-de-Cologne in, and then drench your forehead well with the spray. It's simply delicious. You may keep that spray thing altogether if you like. Hugh gave me a bigger one on my birthday—such a swagger one, with silver-gilt mountings."

Annesley took the "spray thing" from her outstretched hand. She was two steps above him as he stood at the foot of the staircase, and this brought her head a little higher than his. As her fingers touched his open palm he just glanced up into her face once more; and it struck her that he was looking very tired about the eyes. A third person, had such been present, would have probably thought he looked stupid, standing there silently. But Victoria close to him, the living fascination of her making his heart beat heavily, deprived him for the moment of any consciousness of how distinctly stupid his silence must appear.

His eyes fastened themselves on the picture before him—the living picture—which showed him a small, delicate face, a cloud of dark hair, a slight, perfect figure, leaning a little against the balustrade in a characteristic attitude. He saw that her rapid race had brightened her eyes and loosened her hair, making it a shade more soft and cloudy; he saw that it was, too, responsible for the fluttering of the lace, which, where it touched her bosom, rose and fell rapidly with the white flesh beneath it. Like the action of the sun's rays upon a sensitised plate, the picture photographed itself in a flash. Annesley turned on his heel, with a faint exclamation, as of physical pain.

"His head *is* bad," said the girl to herself. "I *do* hope the eau-de-Cologne will do your head good," she said aloud.

"Oh, of course—oh, yes! Thanks awfully."

His voice sounded stifled. He did not look at her again. He seemed very much engrossed with the spray thing, or something.

"Good-night, Victoria, and thanks again." He forced his head round towards her as he said it, and nodded with a faint flicker of a smile about his lips, but his eyes were averted.

"Good-night, Jerry. You're sure you understand that thing?" she added quickly.

"Oh, quite sure," responded Annesley unhesitatingly. "It's a ripper, this thing, and—it's most awfully nice of you to give it me."

He was gone the next moment; the thick baize door slamming behind him with a deep, muffled bang.

He went straight to his room. There he placed

Victoria's gift on the table with great care. In the firelight only, he found some care was necessary. But he struck a match and lighted the candles. When this was done he shut the door and locked it; and then he drew up a chair to the fire, and, taking his new possession off the table, examined it minutely. This apparently was productive of considerable satisfaction to himself, for as he turned it and twisted it, now this way and now that, his eyes and his lips smiled again and again. He looked over his shoulder presently, as if he expected to see some one staring at him out of the shadowy corners of the room. But this was plainly impossible, for, in another moment, he had raised Victoria's gift to his lips and was kissing it passionately. Once, twice, thrice, four times, five times—he must have kissed it a dozen times at the first start, and a couple of dozen more, at intervals, later on.

When, after the last kiss, he found that his head was extraordinarily better, the discovery unquestionably marks a new departure in therapeutics.

CHAPTER XII.

THE 27th of November came and went.

Miss Victoria Leathley's *début* at St. James's Hall was a thing of the past.

The world—that is to say, the world of music—was pretty much where it was before, and Miss Victoria Leathley's place in it was also pretty much what it was before.

Altogether, Victoria Leathley, like many other aspiring artists, perhaps like most aspiring artists on the first trial-trip, neither won nor lost—neither failed nor succeeded.

Owing to her social status and family connections, and to her father's political reputation, her first appearance on a professional platform gave rise to a mild flutter of interest and excitement in various circles. The circles in question, however, did not include those, strictly speaking, of music.

The curiosity and interest which surrounded the new violinist had their origin in the circles immediately above and immediately below,—to speak strictly still, those of music.

The first gave Victoria the interest of friendship and acquaintanceship; the second, the curiosity which buys "Society journals" in order to get, at second hand, a knowledge of persons not to be obtained on the more reliable basis of personal intercourse.

Putting every cause together, however, the result was that St. James's Hall was very well filled on the 27th of November, when a fog, which might have been cut with a cheese-knife, contributed its quota to the cheerfulness of the proceedings.

Public interest in the occasion indemnified itself, perhaps, very fully when it trusted its life and limbs to the various vehicles which set it down in Piccadilly that day.

There is not the slightest doubt that an artist is sensibly affected by a good or bad house. In this respect Victoria Leathley had nothing to complain of. Quite a considerable number of the best people were in the stalls, and it was evident that, had the time of year been June instead of November, a still larger proportion of the same would have been present. The other parts of the hall were filled to equal satisfaction, and there was a fair sprinkling of what newspapers of a certain class are given to describing as "dramatic, musical, and artistic celebrities."

All this is no doubt a step in the right direction and a pleasing prospect in an artist's eyes. Nevertheless, all this will not spell success—at all events, if the artist desires that success shall be spelt in capital letters.

It is unquestionably pleasant to feel that on such an occasion one has all, or nearly all, the "best people" in the stalls. It is equally pleasant, perhaps more than equally pleasant, to know that many of the best people are one's own friends; while the actuality of their belief in one's artistic pretensions being practically demonstrated at the rate of half a guinea a seat, is possibly no less a satisfaction.

Nevertheless, even all this will not make a first performance so much as a *succès d'estime*.

On the morning after her first performance, Victoria Leathley did not awake to find herself famous. That is what every young untried artist is sublimely persuaded will happen to him, or her. The number of young artists to whom it *has* happened would scarcely exhaust the fingers of one hand.

The steeps of Parnassus, to borrow once more the time-honoured simile, look very fair to the climber—beforehand. The ascent seems but a matter of will on the part of him who desires to reach the heights. It is only after a considerable portion of time has been spent in hard climbing that the fact comes home that rough walking, rough stumbling, many fruitless steps, and much apparently useless expenditure of strength, are but the preliminary adjuncts of the journey upon which the many set out so gaily; that it is given only to the few—only, indeed, to those whose equipment is so full of reserve force that it can endure to the end—to reach any appreciable elevation at all before the night cometh wherein all progression is barred for evermore.

The eyes of youth and strength are blind—shall it be said, happily blind?—to this. They see only the way that is so clear, the feet that are so sure, the reward that is so glorious. To them the end covers all. Who shall disillusion them? Who shall persuade them that the reward so glorious, is glorious, perhaps, precisely in proportion to its distance from their view? He will do it who tries all things, even Time himself.

Victoria's estimate of her first performance and its results was, on the whole, a temperate and a true

one. She may have erred on the side of confidence in herself, and in the time to come; but, after all, without a trifle of over-confidence, few artists would ever get much beyond the initial step. At all events, if she were not actually elated by the initial step, neither was she unduly depressed. At least, if she were, she didn't show it. She fulfilled the two or three engagements of which she had spoken to Annesley, thereby, perhaps, more than she was quite aware of herself, somewhat steadying her footing upon the slippery ascent; and then she went down to Eastaston, and the even tenor of her ordinary life knew no further interruption till her return to town early in the following January.

Her people were inclined to be faintly triumphant when they were not faintly ironical. Victoria contented herself with pointing out to them that it had been they, and not she, who had supposed that the sky must fall, or the conditions of English Society collapse, because a young woman of good family, and without any dire necessity, except the impetus given by her own undeniable talent, had chosen to work out for herself a tangible career. If her relations were under the impression that she was now convinced of the error, or the absurdity of her ways, they were undeceived. She had no more intention of turning back now than she had had six months before. On the contrary, her determination was, if anything, more firmly riveted by the discovery that the world is not waiting with open arms to seize every fresh candidate for its favour, and, merely upon the newcomer's introduction, to elevate him upon its shoulders, and bear him above his fellows in open triumph.

Victoria said little about it, but possibly, like the bird of tradition, she thought the more.

When a small boy, hitherto perhaps a unit of some importance in his own family circle, goes to Eton or Harrow, or any other big public school, he straightway learns that, outside his family circle, he is a unit, an infinitesimal unit, of no importance whatsoever. In other words, he finds his level. A professional career, as a rule, promotes a similar discovery.

Victoria Leathley probably needed to find her level as much as any other member of the human family. Her new life would, if it did nothing else, enable her to do this.

When her old friend and kinswoman again attacked her, she found her more temperate, if not a whit less resolute, than formerly.

"Well, my dear," she said to her, "I hope you are satisfied?"

"Perfectly satisfied, thank you."

Miss Payne's eyes sparkled wickedly.

"You little minx!" she said calmly; she smiled ominously as she said it. "You ought to be married and getting your first baby through its teething by this time."

It is not, on the whole, remarkable that the young people of Miss Payne's acquaintance should have sometimes found that woman of the caustic tongue a very terrible old lady indeed.

Victoria laughed, and told her she was a perfect dear!

CHAPTER XIII.

VICTORIA went back to London in January, and during the ensuing months she pleased herself with the assurance that she had definitely adopted, and was making her way in, the profession of Music. She lived at her father's house in Rutland Gardens; *that* he insisted upon, and she was magnanimous enough to give up her way upon what she considered a small point, in return for obtaining it in essential considerations. Her father, whose attendance at the House of Commons entailed his constant presence in London, was with her, and they both, nearly every week, ran down to Eastaston from Friday to Monday. There was no reason why Victoria should not as easily have run down from Tuesday to Thursday, or from Monday to Wednesday; but the Friday-to-Monday period commended itself to her as the legitimate *exeat*, so to speak, of professional persons, and as she was now a professional person of the most serious aspirations, everything pertaining to her position was of the utmost importance.

When Whitsuntide came round, however, she condescended to take a holiday of some days' duration, and she arrived at Eastaston with her father, announcing to her sister-in-law and some friends they had with them that she had left her fiddle and her faculties in town, and meant to

do nothing as assiduously as she had been doing everything else lately.

Annesley had no chance of Whitsuntide at Eastaston. He was obliged to go to Ireland to entertain a Unionist personage of great importance. So he spent the festive season at his own place, Castle Connaught, where he had a party of men to meet the Unionist personage, who had gone over to Ireland, it was popularly believed, to inspect light railways, and form a right judgment on the Irish Question in a visit of nine days to a country house. The Unionist personage filled up the nine days very much to his satisfaction, in shooting rooks, smoking innumerable cigars, and consuming a gentlemanly number of whiskeys-and-sodas. He returned to England convinced that a country which manufactures a national beverage of such unsurpassed excellence as Irish whiskey has, whatever else be urged against it, one point in its favour.

Annesley took the party to a couple of race-meetings which happened to come off within reach, and the Unionist personage made an edifying speech later on to his constituents in England, in which the defence of that much abused individual, the Irish landlord—who ought to be a saint, if martyrdom canonises—was undertaken, on the plea of "personal observation" and "unbiassed opinion."

So Annesley did his duty to his country, and was bored to death by it, and found his reward in losing his best chance, for many months to come, of satisfactory intercourse with Victoria.

Victoria, on the other hand, was having a very good time. There is this much advantage in keeping heart-whole; it enables one to enjoy the ordinary

small pleasures of life so much better. She found many small pleasures in her path just then. The weather was lovely, the country was looking very pretty, roses had come into blow in the Dutch garden, and the avenue of beeches was a green aisle of tender foliage. She walked in the green aisle more than once, yet not once did she give Annesley a thought.

Conway Keppel was staying with them. Conway Keppel amused Victoria. He was her cousin. He didn't want to marry her. They understood one another, and had many interests in common.

But just at this time Conway Keppel seemed to her to be a trifle out of sorts. The systematically philosophical attitude towards things in general, to which he habitually trained himself, looked as if now and then it were in danger of subversion. Victoria thought she detected a note of petulance in his whimsical way of regarding existence and most matters incidental to it.

He was sitting with her one morning in the library, where she was employed in arranging newspaper cuttings relating to her own performances in a large scrap-book. He was reclining in the depths of an arm-chair ; his eyes were closed. The morning was sunny. Victoria wondered if he were asleep.

He opened his eyes quite suddenly, and his lips at the same moment.

"Relations," he observed—he glanced round the room as he spoke, but they had the latter to themselves,—"relations, my dear Victoria, are one of the blots in our defective social system."

"Thanks so much," said Victoria at this point; but he took no notice of the interruption.

"My scheme for the Dis-improvement of the Human Race," he continued gravely, "includes the abolition of human relationships. Think"—he closed his eyes as if in dreamy anticipation of the joy which his words conjured up—"think of what existence will *mean* under such conditions. When Chesterfield said that life would be bearable but for its pleasures, he only uttered a half-truth, he should have added, 'and—one's relations.'"

"There is a magazine, I believe," remarked Victoria, "called *The British Parent.* You should send these reflections to *The British Parent.*"

Conway Keppel opened his eyes once more, and sat up—literally, not figuratively.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "The very thing! It would simply double the circulation."

"What? of the parents?"

But Mr. Keppel's thoughts shot past this feeble attempt at wit without recognition.

"Every British son and daughter would buy that *British Parent.* Yes"—he closed his eyes again, and sank back with a finite smile—"that *British Parent* would be—er—*sold.* And it would not"—his accents grew speculative and dreamy—"it would not be for the first time. I shall consider your suggestion," he continued seriously. "I have a profound sympathy for——"

"The British Parent?"

"No; for the owners of British Parents. *I* am the owner of a British Parent; in point of fact, I am the owner of two British Parents. The responsibility, to say nothing of the constant friction, is awful. The conditions of life will never be really enjoyable until the British Parent is resolved into a historic

reminiscence; very effective—under a glass shade in the British Museum, with a label something like this: 'Bsh. Pt., Early Victorian, Very Rare. No, don't laugh, please. Think of me. I have spent some of the best years of my life educating, or endeavouring to educate, two British Parents. I am reluctantly forced to the conclusion that any such endeavour is hopeless. I get a letter this morning—a short letter, consisting principally of profane interpolations in the original text, to the effect that *I* (in the writer's opinion) am not properly 'taking my stand' upon the House of Lords. What is possible in the case of the writer of such a letter as that? What can I possibly reply? Should I reply, as I have already done more than once, by pointing out that, in all probability, there will very soon be no House of Lords to take a stand upon, it would only lead to such exacerbation of prevailing excitement as to—er—to—make matters exceedingly uncomfortable for *me*. I get another letter, this morning also—a long letter, in a style of handwriting called, nobody knows why, the Italian style—and not divided into paragraphs. In this letter, wrapped up in a series of wildly discursive and, I regret to say, very faulty grammatical sentences and parentheses, I am recommended to marry—to *marry*. If the British Parent or Parents have nothing to offer one but the House of Lords and Matrimony, there is no reason to look upon the British Parent as anything but a complete and grotesque failure. The failure to educate one's parents is one of the most sickening disappointments which meets us even in this world of sickening disappointments. I confess I see no hope for the British Parent. The House

of Lords! Marriage! Even after several years of intercourse with me! Solomon took considerable pains to formulate his views as to how to train up a child. I should like to have had his advice as to how to train up a parent. Possibly he found it necessary to keep his advice to himself. Solomon was profoundly astute; he probably perceived that his public wouldn't stand it. There is so much sentiment mixed up with the matter. Antique institutions gather sentiment around them as antique structures gather ivy. Both the ivy and the sentiment are perhaps picturesque, but they are both, unfortunately, parasitic." He sighed. "One really requires the patience of——"

"Job," suggested Victoria helpfully.

"Job?" repeated her cousin. "My dear girl, Job never owned a British Parent. No, no; Job isn't in it. One needs a higher height of high heroic thing-um-bob with"—he groaned—"British Parents who insist upon the House of Lords and Marriage."

"Talking of marriage," observed Victoria, "I shouldn't be surprised to hear any day that Ada Barclay was going to marry that little man in the 17th Hussars."

She spoke cheerfully, and smiled pleasantly as she made this announcement.

Conway Keppel flung himself back in his chair.

"Man in the 17th Hussars?" He spoke a trifle shortly. "Do you mean that chap Hatchard?"

Victoria smiled with unabated pleasantness, intimating in a word that that was so.

"He's been about with her a lot," she added; "and I know her people would like it."

Mr. Keppel folded his arms, and stared at his feet. When he spoke again it was with a deliberateness that approached languor.

"Girls," he said—he kept his eye fixed on the toe of his boot—"should not marry men in the cavalry. It should not be allowed. Men in the cavalry are a bad lot. Miss Barclay is too young and too—too—sympathetic for a man in the cavalry."

"I can't see that a man in the cavalry is, as a rule, worse than a man anywhere else," remarked Victoria; but she avoided looking at him directly.

"Oh, pardon me. A good deal worse. One knows that beyond all question. It is an accepted fact. Why, eminent lady-novelists always have 'em in for their worst models. The bold, bad man of smashing dashing villainy—that's the eminent lady-novelist's cavalry soldier. Knowing this, can you contemplate calmly any girl marrying one of them? I can't. Hatchard"—the tone of his voice changed here violently—"is a blazing ass! The idea of a fool like that even imagining that a girl like Miss Barclay would marry him is absurd."

"Not at all," remarked Victoria with composure; "at least, I don't fancy Ada will look at it in that way. She's very romantic, you know."

"*Romantic!* Oh, Lord! romantic about a chap in the 17th Hussars, with a waxed moustache!"

"Oh, he's shaved that off," Victoria interposed reassuringly. "Moustaches—certainly waxed ones—are rather off colour now, so Hugh tells me."

"I don't care," was the response. "He's a fool, and an ass, and a snob—a grinning, gibbering, brainless ass."

The speaker flung himself about a good deal in the depths of his big chair.

"Girls," said Victoria, with apparently a want of tact, "do as a rule like soldiers—specially the cavalry."

She did not quite catch the remark which followed, but it seemed to her that it sounded very like "Damn the cavalry!"

He stood up, and kicked over a footstool.

"A girl like—er—like Miss Barclay; a girl with her—intelligence, and general appreciation of—of—cleverness, and—er—that sort of thing, would go stark staring mad in a week."

"Oh, I *hope* not," murmured Victoria softly.

"If she found herself married to a chap like that infernal fool Hatchard. Talk about being mated with a clown! By Jove, it's a libel on clowns. Clowns are no end of clever Johnnies. Cleverest chap I ever saw in my life was a clown at"—the speaker's voice trailed off so much, that Victoria was left in ignorance of the exact locality of the clown's whereabouts; but perhaps on the whole this didn't matter. "Miss—Miss Barclay might marry anybody!"

"Oh, certainly," acquiesced Victoria. "At all events, she may, and I am sure she will, marry somebody. It will probably be Captain Hatchard. If it is, she will do very well, specially nowadays, when one gets so shaky as to whether the supply will go round."

"Oh" (something)—(the word ejaculated was not very clear, but it unfortunately gave Victoria the impression that the speaker meant to say "rot!").

Victoria, you are talking like an idiot!"

I am sorry you should think so"—she took no

notice of the decided rudeness of the last remark. "But perhaps you would tell me what it is *you* propose."

Mr. Keppel started quite perceptibly. If Victoria had looked at him she might have seen his cheeks crimsoning. Possibly she did see it. Women can see a good deal, without looking.

There was a distinct pause. Then Conway Keppel laughed slightly.

"Of course it's no business of mine," he said loftily, after the slight laugh had subsided; "but I must confess that I hate to see two people boxed up together for the rest of their lives who are utterly unsuited to each other. Miss Barclay is a girl of singular—er—intelligence; she grasps what one says to her with quite—er—remarkable understanding. It is monstrous to think of a girl like that being the wife of a snob like Hatchard."

A pretty long silence succeeded this. Victoria went on calmly with her book of newspaper cuttings. Her companion began walking up and down the room. The library was not a large room by any means. By the time, therefore, he had gone up and down from end to end about a dozen times, in a tireless fashion, that recalled to Victoria a hungry tiger she had seen at the Zoo, she felt that she had had enough of it for the present. The sunshine was very hot. Conway was shaking the floor, and the walls were beginning to whirl round before her eyes. She shut up the scrap-book with a decisive bang, and gathered up the scattered papers. Her movements arrested those of her companion.

"I say," he exclaimed, in evident surprise, "are you going off?"

"Yes, I think I must," she replied. But she paused all the same, with the scrap-book and the newspapers in her hand.

"I am afraid," returned her companion, with much deliberation, "that I shall have to run up to town after all."

He was fingering his tie, as he said it, with one hand, and brushing some imaginary dust off his waistcoat with the other.

"Indeed!" said Victoria. "Isn't that rather a bore? There's not a soul in town this week."

"Oh, that has nothing to do with it"—he spoke with extreme decision. "The fact is, I'm extremely busy about one or two things."

"Yes—really?" Victoria's voice betrayed an admirably polite amount of interest.

"Yes. There *is* such a lot—er—to be done, you know. And Holroyd depends on me a good deal. There's nothing for it, as far as I can see, but to go up."

"Well, in that case, I suppose you must."

"As to what you were saying about—er—Miss Barclay. I really don't think she could possibly bring herself to marry Hatchard. I daresay he'll have the cheek to ask her, but I'm equally certain she'll refuse him."

Victoria bent down and picked up a long trail of newspaper that had escaped from the waste-paper basket. Her face was a little pink when she raised it again, and her lips were quivering—no doubt from stooping quickly.

"Extraordinary thing"—he cleared his throat as he spoke, more than once—"how pig-headed old

Barclay is about that house in Green Street. That house has as bad a record as can well be. Yet no power on earth will persuade him to leave it. They'll all die of diphtheria one of these days."

His companion became conscious of a keen sense of amusement at the transparent evolutions of the male mind.

"It is, quite dreadful!" she said. "They've all gone to Paris," she added, with an irrelevance rather peculiar. "I believe they don't come back till the sixth, or so."

Mr. Keppel appeared not to hear. He looked so unconscious, he would have deceived almost anybody except Victoria.

However, he went to London that evening. His business there was evidently excessive, for he returned to Eastaston in time for dinner on the following day.

He said Holroyd, like all the rest of the world, was out of town. He imparted this interesting piece of information to the assembled company in general, at dinner. Victoria understood that it was at the same time directed to her in particular.

Till Holroyd returned, his, Conway Keppel's, business was in abeyance. Holroyd was a great editor—a very great editor indeed. Holroyd was understood to be Conway's patron saint, or rather, perhaps, his tutelary deity. Everything, Holroyd's neophyte added, was in abeyance.

"Yes," said Victoria suddenly—so suddenly that her sister-in-law stared at her. "Quite so—in abeyance."

Mr. Keppel put up his eyeglass, and looked at her mildly. She looked back at him with a guileless smile.

'Conway"—she spoke sweetly—"if at any time you should want to look—your best, you know—thoroughly effective, in fact—make use of that eye-glass. If I were a girl, I couldn't resist that eye-glass."

"Certainly," said Mrs. Edmund Leathley, "for so clever a person, you do sometimes talk the greatest nonsense, Victoria?"

"It is the unbending of a great mind," responded Mr. Keppel smoothly. "Persons of acute intelligence find a strange relaxation in conversation of a trifling, even of an absurd, triviality; in short, in nonsense."

"Well, I never can see anything amusing in nonsense," Mrs. Edmund Leathley observed, with complete decisiveness. "Never. It is waste of time, and lowers the tone of one's—one's—er—mind, you know."

"Edmund," remarked Mr. Keppel, with a sudden access of animation, "has got a new story. Get him to tell it you, Gertrude. I'll remind him to-night. It's really too good to lose—for *you* to lose."

He looked at his cousin's wife with a smile of amiability that shone even though his eyeglass. "I beg your pardon"—addressing Victoria across the table. "Did you speak?"

"No; at least, I merely asked how long your business would remain in abeyance."

"Till old Holroyd returns."

"Ye—es," said Victoria, still sweetly. "That will be on the sixth, or so, will it not?"

There was no reply.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE end of the Whitsuntide recess found Victoria once more at Rutland Gardens; this time with some additional members of her family to keep her company.

She was understood by the world in general to be working very hard. The world in general meant, in her case, her own circle of acquaintances and friends; for, as yet, the greater world which lay without had scarcely become aware of her existence. Nevertheless, she was satisfied that her career was following the usual course. Progress in any profession was, she assured herself, invariably slow; but so long as it was sure, its being slow could be endured.

Art is long—very long—in winning recognition. But Victoria was satisfied—or said she was, which did as well, so far as the world was concerned.

If she was not yet famous, she found, at any rate, that her services were a good deal in requisition, especially by the promoters of charity concerts. It is a very fine thing to get a young lady, well known in Society, and the daughter of a prominent politician, to play the violin at such functions. Victoria, to be sure, required, and insisted on payment, calling herself a professional; but as she handed the cheque on each occasion to the charity in question, the promoters found no difficulty in gratifying her demands. The fashionable charities soon discovered in her a sure

draw, and the professional musicians, who are expected to contribute gratuitously to the aid of such (in spite of their profession), found themselves a good deal relieved of the burden of beneficence.

There was a concert of this sort, one among the many, given at a very notable house, not a hundred miles north, south, east, or west of Park Lane, late in June. The concert was given in aid of the Irish Ladies, who have become very distressed, but very fashionable—as a charity—in London, during the last decade or so.

Everybody, who is anybody, nowadays has come to the relief of the Distressed Irish Ladies; and one of the readiest avenues for the soul which seeks to mount on high—in Society—may be found, if judiciously sought, by means of Ireland's distressful daughters.

So everybody who was anybody, and a good many who were not, assembled in their strength, and crushed their way up the staircase to the magnificent rooms, where for the modest sum of one guinea they were each provided with a seat and the pleasure of listening to a programme of music which the directors of the "Monday Pops.," for instance, would not have dared to offer, even at prices arranged on the most popular scale conceivable. But then the Monday Pops. are not a charity, and the Crystal Palace is not near Park Lane; and to be fashionably charitable or charitably fashionable—it is immaterial which way you put it—means that "you pays your money" accordingly.

Charities, like everything else, go in and out of fashion, and if a charity is not up to date, or in Society, all that can be said for it is that it

will involve its patrons in an investment of money, without yielding that rate of sound interest in return which is so pleasing a feature of properly manipulated beneficence.

But on this occasion there was no mistake. First of all, everybody was there, Royalty included ; real, royal, superlative Royalty, too — for, as everyone knows, there are differences of Royalty, just as there are differences of everything else. It was no doubt a matter of satisfaction to all concerned—the prudent promoters, and the prudent investors, and the Irish Ladies, whom nobody has yet accused of prudence—to feel that they had secured what the shops would call "the first-rate article," when so many have to be content with what the shops would also call "cheap foreign imitations."

The assemblage, in short, left nothing to be desired. There is no need to add anything further on this score. Are not their names, and their dresses, written in the chronicles of the *Queen*, the ladies' newspapers, and the society paragrapher?

Victoria and her fiddle found their way to the platform in due course. Victoria, to say the truth, was not deeply enamoured of this sort of performance. But she believed that the oftener she played in public, the better she was advancing her professional prospects.

The concert ran its appointed course. It included the customary quota of sentimental ballads, sung most unsentimentally by amateur artistes—with titles, if possible. It included the child-performer, who has now been let loose upon a patient public, and whose talents are on a par with those of the "Infant Phenomenon" of the celebrated Crummles

Company, in that they (the talents) "are not to be imagined, but must be seen to be ever so faintly appreciated." It included, too, the young lady who wears her hair cut short, and recites dismal poetry of a second-rate description, and the young gentleman whose hair wants cutting very badly, and who sings comic songs of no description whatever.

There was no one in the room more amused or more contemptuous than Mr. Louis Loevio, who had arrived towards the close, in order to take part in a glee with which the whole performance was to terminate. He felt, too, half pleased and half scornful at his own share in the proceedings. He had, indeed, been called upon at the last moment to fill the place of a more notable singer, who had become suddenly indisposed the day before the concert. This is a regrettable accident which sometimes happens to notable professional singers on the eve of charity concerts.

Nobody knew Loevio, and he knew nobody, so that when, in due course, he took his part in the glee, not one person in the audience probably recognised any special excellence in the voice of the man who sang the tenor part.

Loevio was destined in a very short time, had they known it, to be the idol of their ears, if not of their hearts; but as yet they didn't know it. As yet they had not been told to admire Loevio. You can't expect audiences—in Society—to admire until they are duly bidden.

So Loevio came in and sang his part, and was going away again, a bit irritated, and sulky too, for it's not the pleasantest experience imaginable

to find yourself the odd man out in an assemblage of persons all apparently on good terms with each other and with everybody except yourself.

There was a crush on the landing. Loevio, in the middle of the crush, found himself face to face with almost the only person known to him in the crowd. He found himself face to face with Mrs. Edmund Leathley.

Loevio made—scarcely a step; the crowd was too great for that—but involuntarily an impulse, so to speak, forward. Fully persuaded that he knew Mrs. Edmund Leathley, he was also fully persuaded that she knew him. Loevio's social education was—as yet—imperfect. He very nearly held out his hand. Then he became aware that Mrs. Edmund Leathley's eyes were looking past him. She didn't turn away her head. She merely looked past him, that was all.

There is an art in that branch of social tactics.

Loevio turned white.

Mrs. Edmund Leathley was shaking hands with a young man at Loevio's elbow.

Loevio looked straight in front of him.

A voice close to him made him start. A clear voice, with a touch of coldness in its rapid accents.

"How do you do, Mr. Loevio?"

Loevio looked round. The colour rushed into his face.

"Isn't there a crowd here to-day? And it's rather a bore, but I can't find my violin-case."

Victoria, as she said it, looked at him with a smile. She looked away immediately.

Loevio bit his lip, which was quivering. Tears shone in his blue eyes.

She was touched.

Mrs. Edmund Leathley, her face wreathed in smiles, was conversing amicably with the young man whom she had singled out the moment before.

Victoria's mouth hardened. She glanced at her sister-in-law once, and she turned to Loevio. Her eyes looked dark, and there was a sparkle of mischief in them.

"I wonder—*do* you think you could help me to find it? Oh, thanks so much."

She added this as Loevio found his voice, and could assure her that nothing would give him greater pleasure.

By the time the violin-case was found, he had, too, recovered his usual fluency.

They walked down the stairs together.

Mrs. Edmund Leathley was waiting impatiently for Victoria. Victoria, with Loevio beside her, and a footman behind with the violin-case, proceeded leisurely.

Loevio's heart was beating a trifle quickly. He looked at Victoria, hesitated, looked again. His face flushed slightly.

"I think I heard you say, Miss Leathley, that you take an interest in antique musical instruments?"

His voice was a little husky as he said it; his head was in a whirl, and his quick emotions were all aroused at Victoria's marked disclaiming of any lot or part in Mrs. Edmund Leathley's attitude. But it was a rare opportunity, and Loevio never missed an opportunity if he knew it.

Victoria turned her eyes quickly upon him.

"Oh, yes; in fact, I'm trying to get together a collection on my own account."

She spoke eagerly, warmly; she saw Mrs. Edmund Leathley in the hall.

"I—I have a very curious old viol which I should very much like to show you."

Victoria smiled, and looked interested.

Mrs. Edmund Leathley was walking out at the half-door to her carriage.

"It's a quaint old thing; it was given to my grandmother—we're a musical family" (he smiled frankly)—"under rather pathetic circumstances."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. It is, I fancy, a specimen of what was called the old 'viola d'Amore.'"

Victoria looked more interested.

"Has it the sympathetic strings?" she asked quickly.

"Oh, the devil!" said Loevio to himself. "It—er—has seven—yes, seven strings," he replied. He laughed slightly.

"I am afraid," he continued, "my knowledge of these things is very poor, but this old instrument of mine has seven strings; it's larger than the violin, or perhaps I should say it is clumsier in shape, and it has a curiously carved human head at the top of the—scroll. Isn't it the scroll?"

"Yes," said Victoria. "It must be, I think, one of the ordinary treble viols of the last century. They were made very much in France, and were very popular for a time. I *think* it must be one of these, not the 'viola d'Amore'; but if you look under the bridge you will see whether the arrangement for the sympathetic strings is there. These were fine metal strings, sometimes five, sometimes seven, and even more. It was rather a clumsy

device for heightening the range and tone, but without them your viol cannot be a 'viola d'Amore.'"

"I shall examine it," said Loevio, smiling.

They were standing now at the foot of the staircase.

Victoria, her hand resting on the end of the banister, hesitated for a moment. Her eyes were looking onward through the open door at the carriage, and Mrs. Edmund Leathley waiting for her. She turned once more to Loevio as he ceased speaking.

"Perhaps you would come and see us some day?" she said quickly, "and bring the viol. I should think it very kind of you. My father takes as great interest as I do in those sort of antique instruments; and I know he would be very much delighted to see yours."

Loevio's heart gave a leap. But he spoke with admirable coolness.

"I should be charmed," was all he said.

"Oh, thanks." She smiled. "You know our house, don't you?—Rutland Gardens. Yes, I am very often in, generally pretty late, between five and seven. Good-bye."

Loevio bowed till he almost salaamed. In another moment he saw her carriage roll away.

In another moment he, too, had left the house.

It was now pretty late, but he started off, per 'bus, from Oxford Street to a very different part of the town. There he threaded his way through a number of streets, each, perhaps, dingier than the other, until finally he entered one which formed a *cul-de-sac*, and which was dingier and grimier and more odoriferous than any of its neighbours.

Half-way down this street Loevio paused. He had reached the door of a small shop. The small shop was situated in a small house, that seemed to retreat modestly into the background from those which abutted on it at either side. A narrow window, that might have been cleaned with advantage, revealed a curious collection of second-hand articles of much variety, from diamond ornaments to old tooth-brushes. Over the door, painted very crookedly, was the name "Hermann," and underneath the latter, in still more crooked letters, the word "Dealer."

It was not a pawn-shop, although transactions bordering upon that method of commercial dealing took place occasionally within its narrow walls.

Loevio pushed open the glass door, to which a sharp bell was attached, and entered.

A very dirty person behind the counter looked up at the sharp ting of the bell. The very dirty person, who was smoking a meerschaum pipe, had the peculiar facial conformation, and, when he spoke, the thickness of intonation, which we associate with the Chosen People.

Loevio nodded.

"Well, Hermann, I want to have another look at that old viol," he said abruptly.

"Ou, ah, the violsh."

He puffed placidly at the meerschaum pipe in the intervals of speech.

"Now."

He laid an old viol on the top of the glass case which covered the counter.

"Jolly shabby," said Loevio curtly.

The dirty person shook his head and waved his

curiously dirty hands, upon one finger of which a pretty old ruby ring flashed rosily.

"Schieabby," he repeated. "Vot vould you expec' of a—an insthroomeent—an insthroomeent two 'undred an' fifty year ole?"

"Tell that to the Horse Marines," said Loevio.

"Oh, vell, you may larf, but I *know*."

Loevio made no further comment; he was examining the viol. The latter looked a good deal the worse for the wear. The back and sides, which were thickly encrusted with dirt, had evidently been formed of parallel staves of sycamore and cedar woods, or painted, perhaps, so to appear. They were very much scored and chipped in places, from rough usage, and the classical features of the female head carved at the scroll had suffered a good deal, a broad scratch dividing the lady's Grecian nose nearly in two.

"Well, old boy," said Loevio pleasantly, "when do you expect to sell this hurdy-gurdy?"

"Ou, any day, any day."

Loevio flicked the wood with his fingers.

"It's dead rotten; it'll go to pieces."

"Naw, naw."

"What'll ye take for it, eh?"

The dirty person considered. Loevio grinned

"Vell, vell, that violsh is a beauty. That violsh in Vardour Sthreet vouldn't go undaire ten pound, twenty pound."

Loevio laughed loudly.

"But we're not in Wardour Street, my boy."

"Ou, vell, naw. Vell"—he stroked his chin—"vell, I don't mind lettin' *you* 'ave it at two pounds ten."

Loevio looked at him.

"Vell, look 'ere, five—two pound five."

Loevio drew in his tongue under his teeth, and chirruped.

"You old thief!" he remarked pleasantly. "I'll give you a sovereign for the lot, and a damn good bargain ye'll make of it."

"Coot, coot! for a violsh. Mein Gott! for a violsh two 'underd and fifty year ole! I tell you I couldn't for look, this ish 'ow it ish. I got that violsh from a poor ole man, to sell for 'im as besht I can."

Loevio here winked slowly. Evidently he was on terms of mutual intimacy with the dirty person. The latter did not smile. He waved his dirty hands again over the viol, as if he were making hypnotic passes.

"Oh, ver vell, but I tell you I couldn't. My conshionce vouldn't allow me."

"Blow your conscience!" said Mr. Loevio easily.

"But look; you and I are friends, and I vill oblige. Say two pound, *two* pound."

"Not if I know it," returned his customer coolly. "Look here, Hermann, don't be a fool. You give me that viol. I want it for a young lady who——"

"Ou, ah! Ou,—there'sh alvays a young lady in your case."

He leered affectionately as he spoke.

"Hold your infernal tongue," said Mr. Loevio politely.

"I said a lady who's collecting antique musical instruments. So don't you play the fool with me, d'ye see?"

"A lady," repeated the other. "A connaishure—ou, ah! a connaishure. Oh, I lofe them, the connaishures, they are sho *guilesh*——"

"Look here," said Mr. Loevio, taking no notice of his friend's raptures, "you get this cleaned up a bit. I won't have it *polished*—mind that; not *bolished*, but just cleaned."

"Yes, ye-es. It vill tak two days."

"All right, then. I'll come in the day after to-morrow and bring the sovereign."

The dirty person groaned.

"Oh, mein Gott! vun pound for a violsh two 'un——"

"There, shut up!" said the purchaser calmly.

"But, the young—the lady, I mean, vill vant to add to her collection, eh?"

"No doubt," said Loevio.

"Ah, ha! Vell, *I* could get her pretty things. Only you give me time to—pick them up. You understand?"

He winked and leered again.

"Have this ready," was Loevio's response. "By-by!" He swung open the bell-ringing door once more and left the shop. Then he turned back suddenly. He beckoned to the shop's owner again.

"Here," he exclaimed, "I want that viol for a minute."

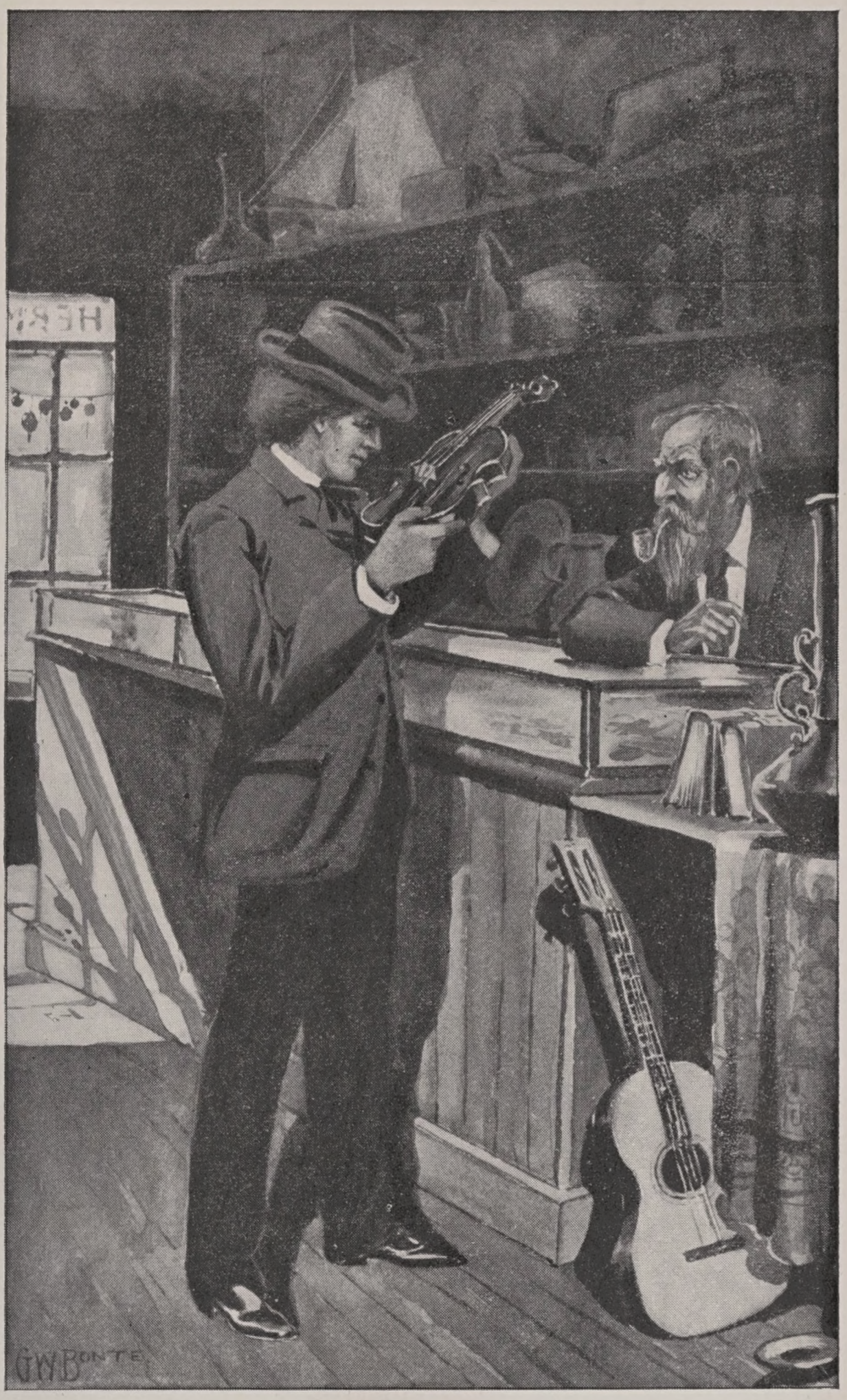
He took it into his hands and scrutinised it carefully.

There was no arrangement under the bridge for sympathetic strings, such as Victoria had spoken of.

Loevio laid it down.

"So it's not the 'viola d'Amore' after all," he said to himself. "She was right; but—never mind, perhaps it'll do as well."

The dirty person wondered what he was grinning at.



He took it into his hands and scrutinised it carefully.—*Page 146*

CHAPTER XV.

On the day following the concert, Victoria was sitting in her room writing out exercises in counterpoint. She was congratulating herself on the amount of work which the blessed interval between five and seven o'clock in the afternoon permits persons in her position in the world to get through, when she heard some one tapping at her door.

Victoria, with a sigh, said "Come in!" and forthwith a young lady did come in.

The young lady had bright, crinkly hair, was beautifully dressed in the freshest of summer toilettes, and had a very coquettish hat crowning the top of her fair head, and making believe to shade her fair face from the rays of such sunshine as may be experienced in England in the month of June.

"Ada!" exclaimed Victoria. Her voice was agreeably cordial, and she jumped up at once and pushed the counterpoint exercises from under her hand.

Miss Barclay advanced quickly and greeted her friend with a kiss.

"I sha'n't interrupt you, shall I?" she said, in her little, young, eager accents. "We are going to the Thursbys' at half-past five or so, but mother has had to go to some Employment of Women meeting, or something of the sort, for half an hour first, and she said she'd pick me up here, and I said——"

The eager accents paused here with extreme suddenness.

Victoria smiled.

"Yes? And you said?" She repeated it twice.

"I said I'd come and see Victoria," concluded the first speaker, with relief, but not, it is to be feared, with truth.

Victoria smiled again, and pushed her visitor into a low, wide, wicker chair, perching herself, at the same time, upon one arm of it.

"Well, darling?"

She flipped the brim of the coquettish hat as she spoke.

"Well, Victoria?" was the response.

The occupant of the wicker chair glanced up as she repeated the words. She met the amused scrutiny of a pair of small dark eyes looking into her own, and she blushed all at once, furiously, radiantly, all over her face, as fair-skinned people do blush, with a rich, scarlet brilliancy about which there is no possible doubt.

"Oh, Victoria!"—the ejaculation came with a rush and a gasp—"who told you?"

"Told me?" repeated Victoria's quick accents ruthlessly. "Told me *what*?"

"You *do* know," returned Ada Barclay. "About—about—him—me—we—oh!"

"Him, me, we?" repeated Victoria again. "Ada, you are refreshingly explicit. But it is beyond me. Explain to me, my friend, this *thusness*."

She caught a glimpse of the younger girl's lips.

"Well, never mind," she added quickly. "I sha'n't tease you about it. But perhaps——"

She paused, and Miss Barclay looked up inquiringly.

"Perhaps"—the words came slowly—"er—Conway——"

The coquettish hat started as if it had been shot.

"He—you—they," exclaimed the owner of the hat.

"Ye-es. Go on, Ada."

"Oh, *don't*," said Miss Barclay pleadingly. "When you look like that——"

Victoria threw her left arm round the speaker's shoulders.

"You dearest of little girls!" she said pettingly. "I am so glad, both for you and Conway."

"Oh," with a long-drawn sigh, and a little nod of the fair, crinkly head, "it *is* so lovely!"

"I am sure it is," returned Victoria, with composure.

"Oh, Victoria"—now that the murder was out, Miss Barclay's confidence returned with quite a rush—"oh, Victoria, I *wish* you could—get—get in love. It's so perfectly delicious, you know, when—when they love you back again!"

She laid a small hand in a pale Suède glove against Victoria's breast as she spoke. The latter bent her head and kissed her friend.

"Now," pursued Miss Barclay, with much animation, "*weren't* you surprised?"

Victoria, however, intimated that there were occasions in her life when she had been more surprised.

The owner of the fair head drew a long breath.

"No? Really?"

She looked quite incredulous as she uttered the words.

"Well, *I* was—oh, yes, *ever* so much surprised, because, you know, Conway——" She stopped short, and blushed bewitchingly. "Conway"—she repeated it with evident delight in the unaccustomed use of his Christian name—"is *so* clever, and—and splendid, and I'm not anything, don't you know. Now, if it had been *you*, Victoria!"

Victoria laughed heartily.

"You'd have been so glad, wouldn't you?" she said, laughing still.

"Well, I shouldn't," returned Miss Barclay candidly; "at least, not *now*."

"Oh, don't apologise," said Victoria, with fresh laughter.

"Victoria"—the tone of her friend's voice changed suddenly—"he—Conway—told me that I—I was the first girl he'd ever wanted to—to marry. *Do* you think that that is true? I read in some book that men always say that sort of thing to girls, but that of course it is never really true. Still—I don't think what books say is always true either, do you?"

Victoria was looking at her intently. She was thinking that the waves of colour passing and re-passing over her fair, bright face made her look more appealingly pretty even than usual.

"What does your mother say?" Victoria asked suddenly.

"Mother! Oh, I—haven't told mother *that*; you see, one *can't*, somehow—at least, not those sort of things, Victoria."

She paused and stumbled a good deal over the words. Victoria was silent.

"But of course," resumed the speaker, with another

rapid change of tone, "she knows about—about Conway, and she's so pleased—*ever* so pleased! And, oh, Victoria, I am to have *such* a trousseau! Mother has settled *that*, even if papa rages and storms over it."

Victoria smiled again.

"But, what do you think?" inquired her friend again. "I mean about—about what Conway said, you know?"

Victoria raised her eyebrows.

"Oh, Conway's a very good sort, Ada; you may take him at his word."

An expression of relief passed across Miss Barclay's very youthful face.

"Conway's not at all a common sort of man, Victoria."

The speaker's fresh voice had a certain accent of reproof in it.

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Victoria quickly. "Not by any means."

Her friend looked at her, but Victoria's face was admirably serious.

"Just think of his writings," proceeded Miss Barclay. The accent of reproof had given place to one of dignity now. "Just *think* of his writings! Fancy being *able* to write like that, Victoria! It's very——"

"Uncommon," said Victoria.

"*Most* uncommon," said her friend. "And, besides, I don't think any one would imagine, from seeing Conway, that he was so clever, and wrote things. I think that's what's so *particularly* nice about Conway."

All dignity had fled from Miss Barclay's accents

by this time. They were once more those of her young, eager self. She nodded her head emphatically.

"So particularly nice—that he doesn't look a *bit* clever; at least—you needn't laugh so, Victoria—that isn't exactly what I mean; what I *do* mean is, that literary people so often look common and *grubby*. Of course"—she spoke breathlessly—"I *admire* literary people immensely—especially—er—journalists. They're the most literary, you know."

"Oh, certainly," said Victoria.

"Because they're always writing," pursued her friend, "*every* day; and, besides, people who won't read anything else read the newspapers. Papa never reads a book, but he always reads the *Times* he says one gets such common-sense in the *Times*. *Conway* has written letters to the *Times*, Victoria."

"I have read them, more than once," returned Victoria seriously.

Miss Barclay threw herself back in the wicker chair with a gesture of pleased contentment.

"All the same, Victoria, literary people *are* grubby—sometimes."

She laughed as she said it.

"But they are," she said again. "Now Conway *looks* so nice," she continued complacently; "and he always wears the right sort of collars, and—all that."

This evidently settled the discussion, for she stood up and began to rove about the room. At the chimney-piece she paused.

"What lots of new photos you have got!" she remarked to Victoria. "Oh, you have got that one

of *him*! I don't like that one, Victoria. Conway's ever so much nicer-looking than that. It isn't his expression one little bit. He's going to have a new one *specially* taken for me by that woman who did mine when I came out; and I'm going to have a new one of myself taken, too. You shall have them both, if they're good. Why—you've actually kept that horrid old thing of me! What a person you are for keeping old photographs! How odd that dress looks now! Old photographs are so funny. We found some of mother's last night, and Conway *would* bag one of me; it was taken when I was five. I remember the day so well! I was dreadfully naughty and fidgety, and they took off my shoes and stockings, and the photographer stuck me up on a silly sort of imitation seaside rocky seat, and I yelled and howled, and they gave me some chocolate creams to eat, and I came out with the chocolate creams all messed up in my fingers, and looking so cross and rumpled. Fancy Conway wanting to have a silly old photograph like that! Isn't it dear of him, Victoria?"

Victoria smiled patiently.

"But, Victoria, *do* you think Conway will always keep on caring for me like that?"

Her eyes were fixed on her friend's pallid face. Victoria gave herself up. The question, it was plain, should be answered.

"Of course he will."

Victoria spoke emphatically. There is nothing like a gallant rush, when you're about it.

Miss Barclay once more looked relieved, even radiant.

Victoria's dark eyes were watching her face.

"Look here, Ada: never anticipate evils. Take things as they come. But if, after you're married, you find that Conway has apparently forgotten to tell you that you're an angel, and so on, don't make yourself miserable, that's all. Very few men *do* tell their wives that they're angels. As a matter of fact, they don't want angels—for wives; they'd much rather have cooks, most of them."

Her friend laughed.

"You're an abandoned cynic," she said, laughing again.

"Oh, no, dear Ada. If you want a man to love you, *feed* him."

"How *can* you be so horrid?" interposed her companion faintly.

"Yes, my dear," pursued Victoria, unabashed; "and I don't know any animal that has a hungrier roar than your literary lion."

Miss Barclay laughed with complacent security. She ran across to the window as a little clock chimed at the moment.

"Ah, here is mother and the carriage. I must go. Good-bye, you cold-hearted wretch."

"You'll live to bless me yet," returned her friend; "that is, if you take my advice."

Ada Barclay laughed again.

"Everybody's been giving me advice, ever since—since *this*."

It was a lame conclusion, and was accompanied by a little pout.

"How nice!" said Victoria. "Save it all up, Ada, and have it on view with the presents. By the way, when is it to be?"

"What?"

"The wed——"

"Oh, not for ages and *ages*!"

Miss Barclay spoke with vehemence, and blushed to match.

"I must go," she resumed, recovering her dignity and her colour. "I must really. Good-bye, Victoria. My hat hasn't got crooked? No? All right. Good-bye."

She ran off, smiling.

Victoria stood in the window and watched her as she got into her mother's victoria and drove away in the evening sunshine. The level rays lighted up Victoria's face, and made her eyes blink; but she stood there, drumming on the window-panes with her fingers, for some minutes.

"I wonder," she said to herself, "if it *is* as good as it looks!"

She did not give herself time to wait for an answer, whatever it might be, for she walked back to the writing-table at the same moment, and took up the book upon counterpoint.

CHAPTER XVI.

IN the space of three years a good deal may happen.

That space of time had nearly gone by since the October day when Annesley had walked with Victoria under the beeches at Eastaston, and been told that it was to be Art only.

Nearly three years had run their appointed course. Three years of rain and shine, seedtime and harvest, life and death.

Annesley was three years older; that seemed to him pretty much all there was to tell, so far as he personally was concerned. Life had gone with him much as usual. He had paid his taxes, and had his hair cut, and visited his tailor at requisite intervals.

During the past year he had gone to Baffin's Bay to shoot walruses. Nevertheless, had any one asked him about it, as he walked down Piccadilly on this chilly day in July, he would have said that, after all, shooting walruses off Spitzbergen didn't seem to him to be very much better than shooting snipe on his own bogs in Ireland.

He had gone to Baffin's Bay because a friend had asked him to go, and there seemed no valid reason for refusing. He had gone, and he had come back. He told himself, not for the first time, that there is nothing new under the sun.

Nevertheless, changes come.

The past years had brought their appointed portion

as every year, and month, and day, is bound to do. They had carried a burden of change to each and all, but separately, and in different degrees.

Victoria Leathley had found them years of steady, persevering work. Work, without any very brilliant reward. It is true that by sheer, unflagging perseverance she had won a place, at all events, in the profession of music. But it could not be said of that place, that it was among the stars of the first magnitude. Apparently the first magnitude was not to be the position for Victoria. Her position exactly was that of a violinist of, on the whole, a fair reputation—the reputation of the careful, cultured artist, who can always be depended upon to give you of the best he may possess.

When Conway Keppel walked out of St. James's Hall, at the conclusion of her first recital, he shook his head; and as he shook his head he said to himself,—

"She will *never* be a great violinist."

His judgment was a true one, and time had verified it.

Victoria was not a great violinist, nor was she any nearer to being one now than she had been three years before.

Nevertheless, to the amazement of most persons who knew her, she was content to be a violinist, without being great, and to accept a position, and do her best to retain it also, which was not of the first rank.

Was this pride? The pride that is too proud to acknowledge even comparative failure?

Perhaps so.

On the other hand, however, she had had her

reward. She had won, at all events, a certain definite amount of recognition in her art. Perhaps it is given only to a few to obtain even that.

Another artist, one among the many who knock daily at the gate of public opinion, had won a reward during these three years. But his reward, unlike Victoria's, had lifted him up among the stars of first magnitude.

Mr. Louis Loevio had won his reward. He, too, had won recognition. But as there are differences of reward, so, too, there are differences of recognition. Mr. Louis Loevio's recognition had been of that unmistakable order which all desire, but few indeed obtain.

The universal chorus of public opinion lifted up harmonious voices to tell him that he was a great singer, that he was a great actor, that his was the genius which can create a great part.

In a word, he was LOEVIO.

When the universal chorus shouts this aloud in an artist's ear, it is very satisfactory for the artist, that's all. It is true that the universal chorus knows probably very little about what it is pronouncing in favour of, but that is a detail, of no importance to any one—certainly of no importance to the object of its approbation.

So the universal chorus shouted aloud the fame of Loevio, and they that heard the sound thereof believed it; and Mr. Louis Loevio endorsed it cordially, in the best way possible for himself—namely by making them all pay for it "through the nose,' as they express it graphically, if inelegantly, on the other side of the Atlantic.

Mr. Louis Loevio had his reward.

His admirers likewise had their reward.

His reward was their money, and their reward was his great genius. It was an admirable division, especially for him.

Thus the world goes on. Here a little and there a little. Life and death, success and failure, up-rising and down-treading, jostling each other gaily in its living kaleidoscope.

The season which was drawing rapidly to a close, as Annesley walked down Piccadilly on this July day, had been one of the greatest failures of past years.

What with the influenza, and the hard times, and the general depression, poor old indefatigable Dame Fashion had found it almost impossible to get the requisite grist to her mill.

Everybody said the stagnation was terrible ; everybody—even the drapers and milliners in Westbourne Grove and High Street, Kensington. So wide are the ripples of the circle in their circumference.

A flutter of activity had indeed made itself visible towards the beginning of June.

Society, like Mrs. Dombey, had had it brought home to its failing faculties that it must make an effort. Society, unlike the estimable but feeble lady just mentioned, *did* make an effort. It did more ; it made several efforts.

The reward of the industrious is always pleasant to contemplate.

The influenza betook itself to fresh fields and pastures new—for a time ; the daily papers began to write about the possibility of a good harvest, and the weekly papers were loud in the praises of those who are fond of asseverating that without Society, and its dinners, and its dances, and all

its various pretty devices for the making away of its money, those inhabitants of London who neither dine, nor dance, would be nearer starvation than they are at present; so ingenious and humorous is the view of life taken by the weekly papers.

But Society, like the Christian philanthropist which it is, according to the weekly papers, did its best for the people who never dine nor dance, and who are nearly starving, by dining and dancing, and systematically overfeeding itself with something approaching to its usual energy.

And the reward of the charitable is always good to look upon.

New toys found their way into Society's outstretched hands.

There are those whose lot it is in life to minister to the needs of Society.

Society never needs anything but amusement and money. The latter is, as a rule, nowadays kindly furnished by America. The former has numerous ministrants.

Not one of these was greater than Ford, the only Ford, who had never failed Society yet.

Nor did he fail now.

On the contrary, he invited Society to the Critic Theatre, to a new—a new and novel treat, which he, the only Ford, put forth for Society's delight.

Ford was a great man, and Ford knew the value of stimulants.

Ford announced, in his own great magnificent fashion, a new opera.

He kept on announcing it for weeks, and every week the announcements gained an extra touch or two of colouring.

The final touch was to surround the new composition with mystery.

It was a new dodge, this, and it caught on, as Ford trusted it would.

So Ford asked every one to come and hear the new and beautiful Work—with a very large W indeed—which he, Watkin Ford, had found, in a neat score, on his desk in the manager's room of the Critic Theatre.

When Ford at last produced the new Work, in his own magnificent way, of course Society responded to his invitation.

Society always went to Ford: Society was under the impression that Ford, and all his works, lived only for its especial delectation. Ford cultivated that impression. He found, as a rule, that it paid —that is to say, it paid him.

So Society went to Ford's new opera. And Society, reduced to a proper level of exaction by the all-pervading dulness which it breathed everywhere in the air just then, went home charmed almost out of languor with the opera and Ford.

Charmed—but to the charm was added curiosity. And curiosity, which Ford took good care should remain ungratified, put the piquant spice into the dish without which it is difficult nowadays to tickle the public palate.

All this, in Society, led to a good deal outside.

Society loving Ford and going to Ford, naturally the outside public, which is never to be outdone by Society if it can help it, loved Ford, and went to Ford also, as fast as it could get places. In short, when Society rose up delighted with Ford's new opera, the public rose up likewise to a man,

and to a woman—especially to a woman; and when Society went so far as to be languidly curious about the mystery of the opera's origin, the public good-naturedly followed suit, and let itself be curious without any languor whatever.

So far, so good, for Ford and the opera.

Last of all came the musical world also.

When Society leads and the public follow, the attitude of the musical world becomes a foregone conclusion. No doubt that was why Ford always began with Society, and continued with the public, and naturally ended with the musical world, and—Success. With Success certainly. Watkin Ford always ended with Success, if that can be said to end which is more properly a continuous stream Success, however, whether begun or ended, encompassed Ford and his new opera.

At that precise moment when Annesley was walking down Piccadilly, London was full of the new opera. Literally so; because it was to be heard everywhere—in Belgravian drawing-rooms, and on the tops of omnibuses, and, in fact, "in all places" (and they are not a few) "where they sing" and play.

Unquestionably this opera, with its classic name, and for its libretto a classic story, was one of the biggest successes which even Watkin Ford had ever put upon the stage of the Critic Theatre.

The name of the opera was "Sappho." Its story, that of the Greek woman who, above all women, won imperishable fame; only, like a woman, to slay herself in the end for Love's sweet sake.

The musician who sets a tragedy of Ancient Greece to a round of modern harmony is one who daringly attempts. In this case the result, at any

rate, justified the attempt. Many causes, no doubt, went to make the success of the attempt; but principally the form of the music and of the dramatic arrangement, both of which were uncommon and strikingly original. The composer possibly owed something to Wagner, yet not overmuch. For instance, he followed Wagner, and wrote his own libretto (at least, Ford said so), and it was quickly apparent that, like Wagner, the librettist, whoever he might be, could write an operatic libretto which could be read aloud and sound like literature, even like sense.

The opera was a one-act one—also a somewhat daring novelty; but the undeniable strength of the music, as well as the concentration of dramatic force, carried it through.

If the whole was unequal in parts, it at all events captured the public taste. After an almost unprecedented run—for the gods loved Watkin Ford—it was commanded to Windsor, and performed there, with every attribute of success, before the Queen.

When the illustrated papers published full sheet pictures of the Royal performance; when the seats at the Critic were booked to the date of withdrawal; when "Sappho's Song," arranged separately in soprano and mezzo keys, was in two rows deep in every music-shop window; when the teachers were all teaching it, and the pupils were all learning it and singing it—quite wrongly; when judicious "cuts" got to be played by provincial organists; and when the newspapers announced that during the forthcoming season a new and original burlesque, entitled "Sappho and Phaon down too Early," would be the piece at the Gaiety;—it is to be hoped that Watkin

Ford sent the author-composer that cheque which is alone the true reward of merit, and which was assuredly his due.

It only remained for professors of the classics, and Greek scholars, to ridicule the libretto, which they were obliging enough to do in letters to the *Daily Telegraph*, and for the doyen of musical critics to prove to demonstration its weaknesses and to pour contempt upon its excellences, in sixteen pages in the heaviest of the Reviews—and its name was *made*.

When it is added that it found itself competing closely in popular favour with the sweet inspiration of 'Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay," the historic incident at Monte Carlo, and the fracas in the Old Kent Road, it will be seen how unlooked-for, and how extraordinary, was the measure of success accorded to an opera which contained real music and real art, and must unquestionably be the work of a real musician and a true artist.

All that was now left to be done was to discover the latter. Apparently that fortunate person was one of the most modest, if not *the* most modest candidate for fame which the ranks of music, at all events, had ever contained.

Who was to find the composer? That was the question of the day. To be sure, Ford had found him. But Ford had plainly taken up the attitude of the possessor of a Chinese puzzle—"Ladies and gentlemen, the new opera! Find the composer!"

Ford's puzzle apparently proved fascinating, for everybody, not to be outdone by every other body, set to work guessing as hard as they could, and with as much success as usually attends that sort of mental exercise.

By-and-by a certain evening paper, greatly daring, announced with a show of authority that besides Ford, one other person was "in the know." This person it overtly alluded to as "the most illustrious personage in Europe"; adding, moreover, that even the latter had been pledged by Ford to secrecy.

When an evening paper in London speaks of the most illustrious personage in Europe, it is scarcely necessary to explain who it is that it means. But at once another evening paper (one which hated the first paper), still more greatly daring, issued a statement contradicting unequivocally the absurd *canard* given credence to by an esteemed contemporary, to the effect that Her Majesty the Queen had asked Mr. Watkin Ford the name of the composer of the new opera of "Sappho," and that, in point of fact, there "was not a word of truth in the story."

This probably did nobody any harm, while it certainly did the opera a great deal of good.

In a country so democratic as England, where a healthy hatred flourishes finely for the Lords of the Council and all the nobility, a better advertisement could scarcely be found than the report that the head of the Council and of all the nobility was so interested in the matter as to interrogate Watkin Ford about it.

At this point the affair remained for some time. But Ford, calculating that even the most fascinating of Chinese puzzles palls after a given time, had of late allowed a rumour to get about to the effect that on some occasion before the withdrawal of the opera, which would take place towards the end of the season, the mystery would be solved.

A supercession of the same added that, on the night of the final performance, Ford would dèclare the authorship, and the composer would show.

The night of the final performance arrived in due course.

Every seat in the Critic Theatre that night was filled before the curtain went up on the first scene; before the last notes of the overture had died into silence. The audience was a thoroughly representative one — pressmen and peers, professors and politicians, "first-nighters," and many who seldom enter a theatre on any night—"Literature and the Drama," Society and the Public, were all there. Even Royalty sent a representative or two.

Annesley, looking round him from his seat in the stalls, thought he had never seen a more brilliant house.

Possibly Watkin Ford thought so too, as he scanned it critically from behind a corner of the drop-scene.

The probability of anything special to be heard or seen had much less to do with Annesley's presence there, than, in all likelihood, with that of any other person in the big crowd which filled every inch of room from floor to ceiling. Annesley was no musician or artist, but he liked this new opera. Some chord in it touched him. He settled himself down contentedly to give it his undivided attention, and the house and its brilliant audience were very soon forgotten. He listened placidly to the luscious notes of Mr. Louis Loevio, the great tenor, without whose superb voice and impassioned

acting—so said the universal chorus—no piece would be complete.

Annesley gave the splendid Loevio the meed of attention, but his delight was in the last and greatest song, the *tour-de-force* indeed of the whole opera, musically, scenically, dramatically—the song of Sappho, in which, standing forth on the Leucadian rock, she pours out all the passion and all the despair of her unrequited love, ere she casts herself into the arms of Death.

The curtain fell.

Annesley's attention, enraptured as it was by the beauty of the song and its passionate melody, failed for a moment to come back to the prosaic reality of actual life. But before it had returned to its accustomed grooves, he became conscious of a sudden and inexplicable stir around him. The peculiar sense of apprehensiveness which so easily takes hold of a large assemblage had already fastened on the audience. Like an electric current the vibration of it swept over Annesley, awaking him forthwith from his faint, absorbing reverie.

He started, and glanced up with a smile—a smile begotten of slightly excited amusement.

The smile died at its birth.

A sound, which had begun in a curious cry of astonishment, had ended in a roar of applause, that shook the rafters to their topmost bar, as it rang and reverberated again and yet again through the theatre.

A cold white mist swept across Annesley's face, coming like a dash of raw mountain air through the arid artificial atmosphere.

Shining almost level with his eyes was the rippling glare of the foot-lights. It seemed to Annesley as if the whole rippling row of fiery lights leaped up and struck his eyeballs—struck them full, while nearly blinding him. He put his hand to his eyes involuntarily, instinctively, for as he looked, there, behind those foot-lights, stood—good God!—the girl who had walked with him under the old beech trees at Eastaston. She stood there before him, self-confessed, the composer of the most notable work of the day, and bowing, somewhat coldly, her acknowledgments to a house whose excitement had probably never been surpassed in the history of the English stage.

The theatre, the audience, the one small prominent figure on the stage, rocked and swayed before Annesley's sight.

He saw her face, white as death from emotion; he saw her eyes, dark as night; he saw the poise of her shapely head; he saw the curve of her lips—the lips he had wanted to kiss; he saw Ford standing near her, but farther back, towards the wings—Watkin Ford, one big, brilliant, triumphant smile from head to foot—delight, prosperity, popularity personified. . . .

FitzGerald Annesley stood up, and left the Critic Theatre.

The ruddy colour turned pallid in his cheeks. He walked stupidly, like one who was drunk, or dreaming. He saw nothing clearly.

He was a slow man, and he felt stunned.

CHAPTER XVII.

On the other side of the stage it looked as if Miss Victoria Leathley was in a fair way of having her head completely turned.

Behind the scenes the astonishment and excitement were quite as great as they had been in front.

The secret had indeed been admirably kept, up to the very last moment. Even the singers and actors had not known, unless one exception be made with regard to Loevio, who, if he had not known, had suspected more than once; although even he had told himself that his suspicions were but a figment of his brain.

It may be imagined, therefore, that the newly-declared composer, after every one had offered his or her felicitations, received altogether a considerable amount of flattery.

She took it very quietly.

Only when Loevio approached her did her composure fail, just for a second. But the failure was so slight and so quickly-passing, that it would have needed a very keen observer to have noticed it. If Loevio observed it, his manner gave no hint of having done so.

Loevio was changed in the past years. Success had brought him certain social advantages, and these had done much for him. He was too good an actor not to possess largely the power of adaptability;

and it had been little troublesome or difficult to him to suit the habits of his life to his altered circumstances. As to these, he was now at the apex of his career. He had now his beautiful rooms conveniently near Piccadilly; he had his brougham and his man—or his two men; he was a member of the Garrick Club, and many others; in a word, he was one of the most successful artistes of the day.

The one demon which he had to dread in the future was the increasing weight, not of years, but of flesh. But so far, even in this, he was still on the right side of the balance. The worst that could be said of him in this respect might be that which was said of one of the greatest of English actors—namely, that he was "corpulently graceful."

In manner, speech, and dress, he had undergone the serviceable process which is called toning down. His magnificent hair was still as *bizarre* in its arrangement as heretofore, but in no other respect did his toilet differ from the most approved conventionality.

Turning to the new composer, he bowed low to her, as perhaps only an actor can bow. Yet there was in it a faint return of the old florid tendencies, which the training of his present life had almost obliterated. It was strange that when he was in Victoria's society the old tendencies showed an inclination to reappear.

Withal, he was very graceful, as he, too, in his turn spoke a word of felicitation.

"It is incomparable—superb! No woman has ever done anything to equal it in music!"

He murmured the words softly, and his great blue eyes looked full into hers.

Her eyes as they met his were cold, but her face grew warm.

"You are much too kind." She spoke very quickly, even for her. "I have to thank you most warmly for your share in the work, and its success. My opera has been very fortunate indeed in having secured such artistes for its interpretation."

But though she thanked him warmly, there was no warmth in her voice. It was clear and cold, even hard. It did not tell Loevio that her heart was beating wildly.

When she at last got home once more to her father's house in Rutland Gardens; when she had heard the last words, and the last congratulations; when she had locked her sister-in-law out of her room, and could sit down alone, and think of it all, her heart beat wildly again.

She threw herself into a big, soft chair, and for some time she sat very still, her head resting on her hand. She thought of it all as she sat there. So she had won—won all along the line. Everything was hers, everything that she had hoped for, or dreamed of. More, far more, than her best hopes. No one knew better than herself the fulness of the measure of her success. Yet, the faint smile that hovered about her lips, as she sat there, had nothing of triumph in it. There was no sparkle of brilliant achievement in her eyes. There was no flush of pleasure in her cheeks. She looked spent, and worn, and agitated.

Some wave of memory recalled a forgotten scene. Words forgotten also recurred to her.

"He said I would harp on that string some day. How strange that it should come *now*! How strange

everything is! And I might have been so happy but for this. *Bah!* What a fool I am! As if it won't all pass away as if it had never been. If—if I was only sure of him! If I only could trust him! But I can't. Besides, a man like that, who is he? I don't know. And his past must be pretty *sketchy*, I should say. Good gracious! how absurd I am! and how I should loathe myself and him in six months! The capacity for love of this sort is inexplicable. It never lasts very long; but, while it does, it is irresistible—no, reasonless. The idea of rational beings allowing themselves to be at its mercy!"

Her face hardened. Then she flushed vividly, and the next moment turned pale again.

She stood up impulsively, and took a photograph off the mantelpiece. It was a large, unframed portrait of Loevio, dressed for his part in her opera.

Her eyes scrutinised it intently. Holding it at arms' length from her with both hands, she still gazed steadily at it.

"Oh, great heavens, *what* a fool I am! I could do *anything* for him—sometimes—now. Jerry was right—yes, I think, I do think Jerry was right. I should have been safe with him—safe. How nice!"

She looked up as she reached this point, and a little, chill sneer twisted her face.

Her eyes fell once more on the photograph in her hands. She raised it suddenly and pressed it tightly to her breast. Loevio's face rested against the warm white flesh.

A moment later, with a gesture of unspeakable disgust, she tore the picture across and across and across, and flung the fragments into the grate.

She bit her lip, and smiled contemptuously.

"It is inevitable, I suppose, for an artist to be emotional. *I* am emotional, but not altogether. It will be amusing to watch how long it will take to get this out of me."

Nevertheless, Victoria scarcely found it amusing.

She grew weary and restive.

The sight of Loevio made her either wild with agitation, or furious with self-contempt.

She hated her love for this man, hated it, even while her heart beat to suffocation at the mere possibility of seeing him, or of hearing the sound of his voice. Often, alone in her room and in her bed at night, the hot tears forced themselves from under her eyelids, tears of burning contempt for her own weakness.

The strongest chain is no stronger than its weakest link. The words are a truism; but truisms lived out in human experience are often as novel as whole volumes of new philosophies.

Victoria Leathley was living out now some world-old truisms in her human experience. That they were truisms, and that they were as old as mankind, detracted nothing whatever from the pain their existence cost her.

A touch of genius, too, is apt to complicate matters terribly, especially when genius has been put to school by civilisation.

Victoria Leathley, a great artist, possessed emotional instincts of the strength of which she was not herself as yet aware. Victoria Leathley, a woman of the world, the result as well as the creature of civilisation, possessed instincts of self-preservation in a degree so strong as to interfere considerably with the promptings of those other and primary instincts

which no order of things has as yet eliminated from human nature.

The contest was not an equal one; but then, is it ever so?

Victoria went through the ordeal of public incense that followed the declaration at the Critic Theatre with a composure which nine people out of ten calledconceit.

She bore the constant presentation of flattery and congratulations, the inevitable whirl of publicity, the blaze of notoriety, with a languid imperturbability, which was not natural to her, because she was not indifferent to her own fame; she was not indifferent to the verdict of the world upon the work of her brain; she was far from careless as to the place which was to be hers in the world of music.

But the reaction of the strain of past years, combined as it was now with the strain going on in her life, produced a certain apathy for the moment which looked like indifference in some ways, and perhaps a touch of intellectual vanity in others. Nevertheless, when people said, as they did say just now, that Victoria posed, as the temptation to a great artist in her circumstances is to pose, they were wrong. She was not in the least inclined to pose, nothing was farther from her thoughts; but they were ignorant of the cause, and they mistook the effect.

Mrs. Edmund Leathley believed Victoria was spoilt.

She was confirmed in this by Victoria's apparent unreasonableness in the matter of their future plans.

Victoria would make no plans.

Now Mrs. Edmund Leathley lived on plans—lived, moved, and had her being upon plans of all sorts. She made plans for everything.

Conway Keppel always said that when Gertrude

Leathley, in the nature of things, found herself removed from this world and placed in the other, she would have perfectly formed plans, already cut and dried, for her method of procedure in her new existence.

At present Mrs. Edmund Leathley was ready with her plan. Her plan consisted in going to Scotland for the twelfth. She meant, however, to go long before the twelfth, partly because she had certain fixed theories as to the desirability of breathing a certain quantity of a certain sort of atmosphere each year, and partly because Mr. Leathley's little shooting-box was so small, and in such an out-of-the-way corner of Scotland, that it was impossible to have visitors there on any extended scale, and perfectly futile to indulge in new dresses.

In a word, she believed Craigvar to be healthful and economical. It would be difficult to determine which attribute pleased her best.

But Victoria wouldn't go to Craigvar. Victoria would neither go now, nor say that she would go later on.

"It would do you so much good, Victoria—ever so much good. You have been living a life of unnatural excitement, and the calm, bracing air of the Highlands——"

"My dear Gertrude, I am *perfectly* well."

Victoria interposed with this, not for the first time.

Mrs. Edmund Leathley had made the same remark on an average of about ten times a day for a week. But she repeated it now once more, no doubt on the principle that you cannot have too much of a good thing. It was the day before

her departure for the calm, bracing air, so that many opportunities were not left to her of repetition. She sipped her coffee, and began again. The two ladies were lingering over their breakfast. Mrs. Edmund Leathley set down her coffee cup.

"You're looking utterly worn out, Victoria. I was saying so—*Edmund* and I were saying so only last night. My dear child, what do you mean to do? Have you no plans?"

"None," said Victoria promptly; "none whatever. Oh, Gertrude, can I have the victoria this afternoon, or the brougham? Yes? Thanks."

"But your father, Victoria—your father depends on you. Have you no plan for him?"

Victoria sighed, and prepared for flight.

"I depend on him, Gertrude. We shall go somewhere—he and I together."

Mrs. Edmund Leathley snapped her lips together. "Edmund and I were saying last night——"

She began it again with unimpaired vigour.

She found herself in a minute talking to the empty air. Victoria, like the man in the Scriptures, had opened the door and fled.

Mrs. Edmund Leathley went away the next day in a little huff, and Victoria was left alone with her father in Rutland Gardens.

"It strikes me that it's about time you and I went somewhere, or did something," was her father's remark at their tête-à-tête dinner that evening.

"I will do anything you like," was the response.

"Oh, I'm ripe for any mischief," he said smilingly.

Victoria seemed unwilling to suggest even mischief.

Mr. Leathley said no more just then.

Two days later he marched into the drawing-room, between five and seven, looking very contented.

"Well, little woman, they told me you were alone, so I came up. Anybody here to-day?"

"Only Ada Keppel. Everybody is packing their boxes, thank goodness!" Victoria replied.

"Well, you may pack yours"—he took up his stand, with his back to the fireless grate, and hummed a tune complacently as he said it—"for—— God bless my soul, what am I doing?" He had got his foot in a flower-pot, and there was a small crash.

"Oh!" ejaculated Victoria. "Poor Shepherd! She is so proud of her floral arrangement in that grate. Never mind. Gertrude isn't here."

Mr. Leathley's eyes twinkled.

"Well"—he turned and surveyed his disturbance of Shepherd's really pretty devices with ferns and palms for filling up the empty fireplace—"I am extremely sorry, even though Gertrude is not here. Who does it, did you say?"

"Shepherd," said Victoria.

"Hum, ha! Shepherd?"

"The upper housemaid," explained Victoria.

"Oh, the big woman with the red hair." He stooped down and endeavoured to right the flower-pot. "There, that's better. Well, I've paired with Maitland, so we may be off. Have you anything to suggest?"

Victoria apparently had very little to suggest. She stood up, and the lines of her small fragile figure expressed weariness and languor unusual to her. Mr. Leathley caught her hand, and drew her to him.

"I saw another new sketch of you to-day, my famous composer. That makes the sixth. I have it below. Hey! you don't want to see it? Don't care a hang about it, hey? Blasé child!"

He put his arm round her waist and held her so that she could not escape his scrutiny—had she desired to escape it. But, on the contrary, he noticed that she leaned against him as she used to do when she was a little child.

"In the meantime, who's going to take me out of town? I'm waiting to go where I'm told." The pressure of his arm encircled her caressingly, and he stroked her cheek softly with the back of his right hand as he spoke. "Town's not exactly pleasant now, is it, eh? By the way, I came on old Jerry to-day wandering about the Haymarket, of all places on earth. I told him if he thought it worth his while to come round here at half-past eight you'd give him a bit of dinner. He said he'd turn up."

He watched her, as he went on talking and smiling carelessly.

"Jerry's looking a bit seedy," he continued; and he thought, as he said it, that somebody else was looking "a bit seedy," too. "Says himself he wants fresh air. I told him he ought to take a turn on his native heath. Gad! you young people are not our betters in health and strength in these days. Hugh told me this morning, with a face as white as paper, that he didn't think, after four months' grind at Aldershot, he would be able even to convey his mortal remains to Eastaston in November. You're a poor lot, compared with your father."

Victoria laid her head for a minute against his shoulder.

"I wish——" she said suddenly. Then she stopped. "So Jerry is coming to dinner?" She looked up at her father, and smiled as she met his eyes.

"Do you know——" She tried to push his arm away from her waist, and get free; but he took no notice apparently of her intention. She lifted her head and kissed him.

"I want to see the sketch," she said sweetly.

But she didn't want to see the sketch one bit; she wanted to escape. A moment later she did escape. No doubt she was satisfied that she had deceived her father.

At half-past eight, when Annesley was shown into the drawing-room, he found her seated there, with William the Conqueror in her lap. If Mrs. Edmund Leathley had been there too, she would have been properly horrified at the idea of any one allowing a large black cat to sit on a dress which was made of bengaline of a delicate shade of colour. Nevertheless, thereupon was William the Conqueror, reposing in dignity and effectiveness, purring all the time with a sound like a boiling kettle.

A break occurred in the sound as Victoria stood up to greet Annesley. William the Conqueror, unceremoniously treated, retired a few paces to an adjacent rug, where he seated himself with his back to the company.

Victoria held out her hand to Annesley.

"Well, Jerry, it's a perfect age since one has seen you. Where have you been hiding yourself? Edmund said something the other day about writing to ask you if you were dead and buried. Rather an Irish way of putting it, isn't it?"

He laughed as he made some light response. He could not take his eyes off her face; he kept wondering all the time why it looked so pale and wan.

Victoria became aware of his scrutiny at once, and set it down to her careful toilette. The latter was several degrees smarter than was at all necessary for dining at home with her father and Jerry Annesley.

When Victoria told her maid that she would wear the *vieux-rose* dress, with the point-de-Venise lace on the bodice, tnat evening, her maid might well have stared—that is, if she had not been far too well trained to so far forget herself—because the dress in question was so much out of proportion to the occasion. Nevertheless, Victoria did wear it, and in consquence experienced distinct pleasure in Annesley's scrutiny. And this, too, when all the time she was feeling tired, bored, and unhappy.

The woman who is young and fairly good-looking must be very miserable indeed when the consciousness that her appearance is pleasing and her toilette perfect, fails to give her any gratification.

That bengaline frock, with its becoming shade of *vieux-rose*, to hide the pallor of her face, with its superlatively good cut, and superlatively good fit, with all its cunning arts and graces whereby the slimness of her waist and the outline of her bust were accentuated, was a complete gratification to her now. Happily she did not know that not all the arts of the modiste, nor the aid of the *vieux-rose* colouring, could disguise the pallor and drawn weariness of her face.

Annesley was still studying it furtively when Mr. Leathley came in.

"Hullo, Jerry, my boy, there you are! Hope

you'll get something decent to eat. Gertrude took the cook to Craigvar, and Victoria and I are living on the kitchen-maid—who is an understudy—and the fat of the land, especially the fat. Cook's understudy is very fond of fat. She also seems convinced of the truth of the good old proverb 'There's nothing like leather.' This young woman," nodding in Victoria's direction, "happens to be off her feed just at present, so *she* don't care. . . . Jerry, my boy, never live with a 'celebrity at home,' if you can help it."

"I think," said Annesley, "that it ought to be a celebrity abroad as soon as possible. I can't say, Victoria, that you look up to much in the way of strength."

He looked at her with a kind smile as he said it. Victoria flushed and turned pale. Her colour was very fluctuating just then.

"Oh, my looks! All my friends have apparently got my looks on the brain. I must say I am *slightly* tired of comments on my personal appearance."

This was said pettishly; indeed, more than pettishly; downright crossly.

Mr. Leathley just saved himself from chuckling. He always said that Victoria, cross, amused him beyond measure. He had an old and feeble pun about *his* Victoria cross. He used to air this feeble pun in the days when the authorities in the nursery found the pun and its cause anything but amusing.

Annesley made no remark. Probably he did not consider any remark necessary. Victoria, with the red colour still coming and going in her white cheeks, caught up her beloved cat and buried her

face in his fur. It was perhaps as well that dinner was announced at that minute.

During dinner the two men had the conversation pretty much to themselves. Victoria apparently was devoting herself to her dinner so assiduously as to leave her unable to sustain any great share in aught else. Her father was unquestionably the most talkative and most cheerful of the trio.

"I suppose," said Annesley, "you go to Craigvar for the twelfth?"

Mr. Leathley shook his head.

"The powers that be," looking down the table as he spoke at Victoria, "won't go to Craigvar this year. The powers that be are going to take me to Cornwall; at least, so I am given to understand."

"To Cornwall?" ejaculated Jerry.

"Yes, my boy. Hum, it's a very fine thing to be father-in-law to a very magnificent three-tailed bashaw. Jerry, old chap, take a word in season. . . . Oh confound it! that woman will poison me with pepper. She's emptied every grain of pepper in the place into this thing! But—about my word in season. (My seasoning's better than the understudy's, not so pungent; pungency's the fault of youth; at least, the pungency which is crude.) At all events, Jerry, avoid, as far as possible, being the father of a famous composer. Famous composers are all very well—at a distance. Distance, you know, lends, etc., etc."

"But what," said Annesley solidly, "are you going to do in Cornwall?"

"How can I tell you? I fancy we shall go out in a boat a good deal, and compose new operas, you know."

"How long shall you be there?"

"Sealed orders," replied his host solemnly.

Annesley was puzzled.

He glanced at Victoria again. She was cutting her meat into small squares, and distributing it round her plate. This operation kept her suitably employed, while it obviated the necessity of eating.

By some impulse suddenly prompted, Annesley said to her,—

"So you never came to Castle Connaught, Victoria, after all?"

She looked up and met his eyes.

"Ask us now, Jerry—at least, in September—and we will go."

Annesley could hardly believe his ears.

"Can't we, father dear?" she continued, addressing the latter, who perhaps was little less surprised than Annesley.

Mr. Leathley assented readily, and the three set to work to arrange it. To Victoria it was a matter only of indifference. She had been prompted to it more by a desire to atone to Annesley for the abominably cross speech which she had allowed herself to make to him before dinner than by any real preference for Castle Connaught.

But to Annesley everything else was blotted out by the one fact that he would have her at Castle Connaught in a few weeks. And yet there was no possibility of any ulterior good to hope for for him from this visit. Nevertheless, an extraordinary feeling of delight lay in the prospect of it. He could not have explained to himself, or to any one else, why this was so, or why it should be so—only it was so. It is fortunately not

necessary to explain the causation of happiness in order to enjoy the happiness itself. Annesley, without any explanations or analysis, was able to be happy now. Unreasoningly happy it might be, but none the less really so, on that account.

"Good-bye," he said to Victoria, smiling into her eyes, as he stood up to go away; "at least—not good-bye, but au revoir, till we meet in Ireland."

She smiled, too, at the unconcealed pleasure in his accents.

"Till we meet in Ireland," she repeated. "How funny it sounds!"

But all the same, she, too, if not actually delighted, was at least contented with the prospect.

To go to Ireland would be a novelty. It would be something to *do*, something of a welcome distraction. Anything that could have helped her to get away from herself would have been grateful to her at that moment.

Besides, Loevio would not be in Ireland. Loevio, she knew, had refused an autumn tour in the provinces and Ireland. He had said he wanted rest. Ireland, therefore, would be safe so far as Loevio was concerned.

Victoria, as she thought of this, assured herself with insistent iteration that she was glad that this was so—very, *very* glad.

All the same, the tears filled her eyes.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WHEN Victoria took her place with her father some weeks later in the Irish mail train at Euston, she looked the better of her sojourn in the little Cornish seaside village where Mr. Leathley had good-naturedly remained during the days when he possibly would have preferred to have helped his son to shoot the grouse which, whether he had any sport or not, he was paying for at Craigvar.

But Mr. Leathley and his daughter had very much enjoyed each other's society. They were always good companions to each other, and of late it had not been easy for them to be much together for any length of time.

As the train moved slowly out of the station, Victoria experienced a sensation of amused expectancy. It was something novel to find herself starting for Ireland to stay with Jerry Annesley at Castle Connaught. She settled herself down comfortably after a while, and long before the train reached Crewe she was actually sound asleep.

Even at Chester she only opened her eyes dreamily for a minute, not realising in the least where she was, or what all the shouting, and banging of doors, could mean.

But when Holyhead was reached she was roused very effectually as the train shot down to the jetty. There the flaring lamplight showed her dazzled

eyes a gleaming glimpse of water, and, close up beside the train, a long, dark object, relieved with what looked like great patches of white here and there upon the dark surface.

Victoria sat up, rubbed her eyes, pulled herself together, straightened her hair (or thought she did), and stared with all her might and main out into the lamplit darkness, to discover that the long, looming black object was a big steamer,—one of the big steamers, indeed, which carry Her Majesty's mails and Her Majesty's subjects swiftly and safely across the streak of sea which divides Great Britain from Ireland.

"We've got the *Ireland* to-night," she heard a gentleman say to his wife; and she discovered that "the Ireland" was the name of the steamer, whose gangways were already crowded with passengers and porters, wending their way in a long file under the lamplight. The stillness of the night was broken by the echoes of the different voices, and the bustle of getting the "mails" on board as the stream of porters, each with a heavily laden linen bag across his shoulder, ran to and fro between the steamer and the train.

Mr. Leathley, who knew the place and its order of proceedings pretty well, was amused at the face of Parker, Victoria's maid.

Parker was a person of experience. Parker knew the ways of travelling—of polite travelling. Parker had, as old-fashioned biographies express it, made the grand tour. But neither the grand tour, nor polite travelling (in Parker's estimation), included Ireland—Hireland, Parker was pleased to call it.

"Hireland!" said Parker to herself, as she clutched

Victoria's bag and found herself jostled along the gangway. "The hidear of Hireland! Well, I never *did* in all *my* life!"

"Here ye are, *miss*; moin' wheer ye're goin'. Kape ta the roight!" cried a friendly blue-coated official with a rich, resounding brogue, grabbing Parker by the arm as he spoke from his place at the foot of the gangway.

"Fine passage to-night, hey, my man?" observed Mr. Leathley, with a twinkle in his eye, addressing the blue-coated one for Victoria's benefit.

"Foine passage! Begorra, ye're honour 'll get to Kings*town* ta-night same as if ye wor in ye're own arrum-chair. Ladies' cab'n, sir? All roight, sir. Young lady got a bert', sir? Stewardess, me lady?"—he touched his cap to Victoria. "Aw, yis, me lady, below in tha ladies' cab'n, me lady."

He lowered his voice quite half a tone in addressing Victoria.

"Now, then!"—waving his arm, and raising his voice once more to its accustomed pitch. "Come on ow a that with them baags. What tha blazes are ye waitin' for over there?"

Victoria heard the echoes of the big, rough brogue in her cabin, roaring out a dozen commands, execrations, and admonitions, to a dozen different people, in one breath.

Nevertheless, the owner of the brogue had spoken truly. They had a beautifully smooth passage, and Victoria, who was no better a sailor than the majority of her countrymen and women, lay in her berth, quite undisturbed by even a hint of sea-sickness. She even slept, though not so well as in the train. But this was owing to Parker. Parker,

who believed herself to be undergoing martyrdom, thought it incumbent on her, and suitable to the exigencies of her condition, to indulge in the gratifying relief of groaning—respectfully, indeed, as became a lady's maid who had lived with the best families; but still audibly and at recurrent intervals. She was not in the least ill. Probably, if the truth were known, she had never felt better in her life; but during the delights of martyrdom, particularly martyrdom on the sea, the resigned nobility of the martyr is permitted to consume his soul in groans. At least, Parker had always understood so. Like a woman and a Briton Parker claimed her privileges.

Victoria got very little sleep.

A recurrent groan, which keeps you looking out for it about every ten minutes or so, cannot, on the whole, be taken as a soothing sedative. Parker did not sleep. Martyrdom and sleep are not compatible. During the three hours and a half, or so, that the mail steamer spent in crossing the Channel, Parker, wide awake, enjoyed the groaning of the justly injured to her heart's content.

Altogether, Victoria was not sorry when, in the early morning, a tap sounded on the door of her cabin, and her father's voice exclaimed,—

"How are you, young woman? All right? Do you think you feel able to come up on deck and look at the view, hey? Say yes, and I'll wait for you."

Victoria said yes very readily, and in an incredibly short space of time she opened the cabin door and joined her father.

"Good child!" said the latter approvingly. "Now, come along, and I'll show you something worth looking at."



They walked together as the steamer swept smoothly along.
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Something worth looking at, indeed! Victoria uttered a little cry of surprise at the scene which spread itself before her when they reached the centre of the deck. The *Ireland* was now in the Bay of Dublin, about three-quarters of a mile outside Kingstown Harbour.

Before them, and behind them, and around them, lay a sapphire sea. Along the coastline ran the sweep of the bay, edging a valley enclosed in an almost perfect amphitheatre of hills. The shapely outlines of the hills rose fair and clear against the blue horizon. Over sea and land the newly-risen sun was shedding a glory of golden light. Rain had fallen in the night, and the peculiar softness and richness of the verdure of the country was apparent, even in the distance. A fairy-like radiance and freshness lay over the approaching landscape; and the lambent atmosphere spread, as it were, a smile of beauty on the face of earth and sky.

Victoria, looking round her, drew a long breath, and exclaimed,—

"*How* beautiful! Why did nobody ever tell me Ireland was so beautiful?"

They stood and walked together, she and her father, as the steamer swept smoothly along; the coastline drew nearer, and the white houses, dotted here and there singly, and in clusters, and in rows, became more and more clear, until Kingstown Harbour itself was reached, and the big vessel turned in at the harbour's mouth neatly. Two minutes later they were alongside the pier; the gangways were thrown down, Victoria crossed them with her father, and the latter said to her,—

"Now you're in Ireland."

The train, which was drawn up on the pier, carried them quickly up to Dublin.

Victoria seemed in the mood to enjoy everything.

"Look!" she said, as the train steamed into Westland Row station. "Aren't those Irish jaunting-cars? Oh, do let's have one to the hotel."

Her father laughed.

"Very well," he said good-humouredly, "if you think you'd really like it; but remember, they're odd conveyances for unaccustomed people."

But she was not to be daunted. An "outside car" she would have.

Mr. Leathley ran his eye rapidly over the long line of cabs and cars.

"Here," he said; "here's a humorous-looking 'jarvey'; we'll try this fellow and his car."

"Car, sir?" cried the man in question, catching Mr. Leathley's eye fixed on him. "Here ye are, sir!" He stood up as he spoke, on one side of his car, and waved his whip excitedly. "Here ye are, sir! Yis, sir, Will the young la-ady sit beside ye, sir?"

Mr. Leathley nodded.

"Certainly, my man," he said. "Now, my child," he added, to Victoria.

He helped her up, putting her at the lower end of the car, while he himself took the top seat beside her, next the horse.

"Properly speaking, we should sit one on either side of the car, and the driver on the little front seat of the well, but I'll keep beside you till you get used to this sort of conveyance. Now, are you all right? Look at Parker's face, with that gesticulating railway porter. Hold on tight, especially going

round the corners ; they turn very sharp, these chaps. Shelbourne Hotel, my man, and go by Merrion Square."

"Aw, yis, yer honour, be the Juke's lawn, yer honour."

Victoria found it a matter of some difficulty to hear what was passing between her father and their comical-looking Jehu—who wore an exceedingly battered grey felt hat, of a nondescript shape—owing to the rattle of the car and the rapid, resounding clatter of the horse's hoofs on the stone pavement ; but she just caught the words, "Duke's Lawn."

"What is that?" she said to her father.

"Linsther Lawn, me lady," said the carman, replying to her question. "There it is, miss," pointing with his whip, as he spoke, to a small public garden. "An' that's tha Queen's husband in the middle, that *statute*, and that's ould Linsther House. Aw, yis, yer honour, sure 'twas tha Juke o' Linsther's own town house wanst on a toime ; an' a great, gran' juke he is ; aw yis, an' a gran' fam'ly are tha Geral*dines*—tha fightin' FitzGeralds they're well named. Aw, thin, yis, that's the house, an' poor Lard Edward himself escaped out of it. He did so. An' he'd 'a' got off entirely, on'y for his wife, God help her! Sure, she couldn't lave him alone, but screeching and goin' for ta see him here, there, an' everywhere, an' so didn't the blagguard roofins folly her an' nab him in tha ind, an' didn't they shtarve him to death in tha prison, bad luck to thim for it! Aw, they did that same, sorra a word o' lie."

This ingenious blending of fact and fiction considerably amused Mr. Leathley, who had some acquaintance with the facts of Irish history.

"Who was Lord Edward?" inquired Victoria.

"Oh," replied her father, "he was a son of one of the Dukes of Leinster, and took a part in the Irish Rebellion of 1798. That's a smart little mare you've got," he added, to the carman; "you want a good goer in these streets, hey?"

"Aw, yis, yer honour, and now, wid tha mili*tairy* gents that most hires us, it's drive be this an' be that wid 'em."

"I suppose so; but they're very good pay?"

"Aw, well, yis, sir, tha most o' thim is, I'll not deny it, very free-handed, and off-handed; but sometimes, bedad, they're mane enuff. Now there was a fella, a great mili*tairy* gent, an' wan evenin' last winter he called me beyant there at tha other side o' the square; an' sez he ta me, sez he, 'I'm goin' to tha Castle,' sez he, 'for ta dine wid tha Lard-Lift-nant,' sez he, as grand as ye plaze; an' up he jumps. An' indade, 'be tha same token,' sez I ta mesilf, sez I, 'an' I'm thinkin' ye're not *much*, an' it's not dine wid Quality ye do often, or ye wouldn't be so burstin' out o' yersilf wid tha pride o' ye.' But at all events, 'Drive like tha divil!' sez he to me; 'it's thinkin it's late I'll be.' 'Aw, yer honour,' sez I, 'we'll not have ye late *anny*-how.' An' I whipped up tha mare, an' we druv like tha divil, indade up—does yer honour know where tha Castle o' Dublin is?—well, up ta it; an' I landed him down in foine toime, bedad. An' off he gits at tha dure, an he throws me a shillin'; *a shillin'*, yer honour, an' he goin' ta dine wid the Lard-Lift-nant! Aw, thin I was that mad, whin I seen tha dirty coin, that I was mad enuff for ta throw it afther him—ay, up tha gran' staircase—ay, an' before

tha gran' John-men in their illigant liveries, an' tha sogers an' pelice an' all; on'y just I wouldn't demane mesilf. But I'll tell yer honour I just got down off a' tha car, an' I bawled afther him, an' he goin' up tha hall wid tha ould head ov him stuck up in the air it id make ye sick for ta look at it! 'Aw, thin,' sez I, at the top o' me voice, 'Aw, thin,' sez I, 'if his Ex*cel*-lency could know tha dirty ragga-muffin that was goin' ta dine wid him, it 'ud take away his appetite, bedad; he wouldn't get over it for a month o' Sundays.' Heth I did, sir. I didn't care what I sed. An' two young la-adies that were goin' in, dressed (it would take tha sight from yer eyes to look at thim), sure they took ta titthering an' ta laffin', tha craytures; an' sure thin I had for ta laff mesilf. But all the same I was that mad enuff for annythin'. An' I'll tell yer honour, as I druv down Dame Street, ye'd think there was a fog in tha air from the steam o' that little mare, bedad, ye would, afther the rate I druv her with that spalpeen. *A shillin'*, an' he goin' ta dine wid tha Lard-Lift-nant! Faith, it might 'a' riz his ould heart to a half-a-crown annyhow. Aw, tha naygur!"

The narrative and Victoria's laughter were cut short by their arrival at the hotel. Mr. Leathley, mindful of the delicate hints contained in the fore-going recital, was careful to give their voluble Jehu not less than double his fare; a proceeding that drew from the latter the emphatic pronouncement that—

"His honour was a gintleman, an' no mistake. Faith, a blind man could see that wid one eye. An' long life ta him an' tha young lady! An' it 'ud be a lovely day, plaze God, an' he could drive thim all around Dublin, an' he'd kape tha mare

as fresh as a daisy for ta take thim about in *style*, bedad!"

But Mr. Leathley intimated that their stay in Dublin was only for an hour or two, which put an end to any further negotiations.

At half-past eleven they left the Shelbourne Hotel, Victoria again insisting on a car. But this time the driver was a taciturn person, who could not be drawn into anything further than yea or nay, as he drove them smartly through the streets and across the quays and the awful-smelling river, which Mr. Leathley informed his daughter was the "immortal Liffey," and which no human nose that has ever inhaled its especial aroma is ever likely to forget. Notwithstanding the smell, however, Victoria declared she was enjoying herself greatly, as the morning air blew in her face and they rattled on finely.

"I do think," she said to her father, as they were set down at the railway terminus once more, "that these Irish cars are most exhilarating vehicles."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE "Dublin train," as the country folks call it, swept on through the Irish counties; it swept on past cornfields, with the corn in "stooks," and over bog-lands with the peat-sods, or turf, as they say in Ireland, piled up in banks; it ran along by flourishing plantations, and caught, now and then, glimpses of winding rivers, or canals; it steamed almost through the heart of picturesque ranges of hills, and stopped several times at country railway stations.

At the latter, Victoria, leaning forward in her seat, watched the medley of life, as seen through the window of a railway carriage, in this strange, almost foreign, land. The noise, and the genial way in which every one, each and all, talked together at the top of their voices, amused Victoria. Even the indefatigable newsboys, running along by the open doors of the train, and screaming 'All the Dublin pa-a-pers, *Oirish Toimes* and *Frayman's Journal*," seemed to her interesting, by reason of their odd, excitable unlikeness to their *confrères* on the other side of the Channel.

It was nearly four o'clock in the afternoon when the train drew up at Kilsallagh station.

Mr. Leathley flung his newspaper on the seat beside him, and stood up.

"Here we are!" he said, opening the door of the railway carriage.

Victoria jumped out lightly after him on to the platform.

A young footman, who, Victoria thought, might have been an inch taller with advantage, but who was sprucely got up in a dark pepper-and-salt coloured livery with silver bands on his coat-collar, and well-polished silver buttons, came forward and touched his hat.

"Castle Connaught, sir?" he said interrogatively, addressing Mr. Leathley, and in a couple of minutes Victoria found herself outside the station, a fresh breeze from the mountains blowing in her face, and the village of Kilsallagh lying before her.

About half-a-dozen vehicles of different sorts were drawn up on the square patch of common outside the gate of the railway station. The vehicles included two donkey-carts, in one of which was seated a picturesque old person, who had a red cotton handkerchief, with large white spots, tied like a hood over her bonnet. There was also a big, clumsy jaunting-car, drawn by a raw-boned white horse, and painted bright scarlet, with the letters—

"V. R.

ROYAL MAIL CAR, KILSALLAGH,"

inscribed on the back, a two-wheeled croydon, a private omnibus, and an open landau.

The landau, which was well built and nicely turned out, was drawn by a well-matched pair of carriage-horses—dark bays, with black points—and was driven by a well-shaved coachman, in a livery corresponding to that of the footman who had addressed Mr. Leathley.

The well-shaved coachman turned his head stiffly as the latter appeared, and jerked his whip-hand to the brim of his hat.

"Well, Flynn," said Mr. Leathley pleasantly, knowing the ways of the country, "how are you?"

"Quite well, thank ye, sir. An' I hope I see ye in good health yerself, sir, an' I'm glad to see ye *here* again, sir."

"Thank you, Flynn. You see I have brought my daughter with me this time. This is Miss Leathley's first visit to Ireland."

The whip-hand went towards Mr. Flynn's hat again.

"Ye're heartily welcome, mam. An' if it's the first visit, I hope an' trust it won't be the last, annyhow."

Victoria smiled and got into the carriage, and the short footman spread the fur rug over their knees, and banged the door upon them the next minute, with a sort of small flourish, doubtless intended for the benefit of the various onlookers.

"Ha!" exclaimed Mr. Leathley—and he leaned back, and tilted his hat a little farther over his eyes—"it's a pretty country, isn't it?"

"Very," said Victoria dreamily.

The carriage drove through the short, steep village street, crossed the bridge over the river, passed the Protestant church and the Roman Catholic chapel, and was soon out upon the uplying road, with the blue hills lying against the horizon, and the wide landscape, which was divided by low hedges stretching away before them. It lay divided into stubble-fields that looked like burnished gold, and

potato-fields of deep, dark green, and pasture grass of brighter verdancy; and the pale gold rays of the sunshine shed a haze of radiant light over it all.

They rolled on swiftly beside the hedgerows, and under the shade of lime, and oak, and ash trees, and sycamores whose leaves were the colour of ripe corn, until, after about twenty minutes, the carriage turned in at a very unpretentious gateway, which had a square lodge with lattice-windows set in a patch of velvety greensward, amid some very fine timber.

"The avenue," said Mr. Leathley, breaking the silence, "is nearly two miles long. We shall be at the house in a quarter of an hour."

To Victoria, perhaps on the principle that the last stage of a long journey appears interminable, the avenue at Castle Connaught seemed as if it would never end. Nevertheless, she was genuinely delighted with the aspect of the place, the size and beauty of the timber, the glimpse of the nearer hills all glorious in their autumn clothing of purple heather and golden gorse, and the verdant freshness of the pasture in the park as the sunshine streaked it in long arrowy beams of light through the up-standing spread of the trees.

"Yes," said her father, in reply to some remark of hers; "he keeps it all up very well—uncommonly well."

"Do look at those grass borders," continued Victoria, pointing across him as she spoke. "Why even Aunt Doll's eagle eye could scarcely find a fault in those grass borders."

He smiled.

"Now Victoria, here's the first peep of the house. Look!"

Victoria, following his indication, caught a glimpse, but only a very bare glimpse, of a grey gable, and a window with the flash of level sunbeams on it, ere the undulation of the ground hid it from her view again. Five minutes later they swept round one more graceful curve, and facing them stood the tall gates of the courtyard. The former were of finely wrought iron-work, and they had the Annesley arms worked into the centre of each, and the Annesley crest—a deerhound's head out of a ducal coronet—surmounting both. The gates lay open hospitably, and in another moment they were within the courtyard, and Castle Connaught itself was before them.

A fine, solid block, built of Irish mountain granite, not in the least resembling a castle, but rather in the pointed, gabled style for which the comprehensive term "Tudor" covers so much.

Victoria thought of Jerry as she looked at it. Its air of simplicity, of solid, unostentatious worth, seemed to her characteristic of its owner. Mr. Flynn, with duly effective rush and flurry, drew up at the wide, mullioned doorway, which had the Irish motto: "*Cead mille failthe*" (A hundred thousand welcomes) carved in Celtic lettering on the stone pediment above, and Annesley came out on the doorstep to welcome them. His fair, smooth hair, in which a thread or two of grey showed here and there, was ruffled up at the back of his head by the breeze, and the colour welled up warmly in his cheeks under the fine bronze of his face.

He had been listening for the sound of his horses' hoofs for ten minutes. As the landau drove up the

avenue and in at the courtyard gates, he saw Victoria in the carriage, and all the colour went out of his face in the unwonted whirl of agitation that sent the blood in a rush upon his heart. But the colour had come back, and he looked calm and bright, although his hands and his voice shook a little as he went forward to meet them. He held Victoria's hand in his with a warm cordial grasp, as he said quickly,—

"Welcome to Castle Connaught, Victoria."

"Ah, Jerry, my boy, how de do?" exclaimed Mr. Leathley smilingly. "Here we are, you see, at last. But Victoria is perfectly disgusted with Ireland and all its ways. She declares she'll go home to-morrow."

"Don't believe him," said Victoria, who, in Annesley's eyes, was looking as fresh as paint in a well-built costume of blue serge. "I am enjoying everything," she added, as they entered the hall.

She glanced round as she spoke at the walls of polished oak, against which some old Irish pikes and other specimens of ancient fire-arms were hung, and the wide, square staircase of oak, with a mellow light streaming down on the crimson carpeting from the oriel window at the head of the stairs.

"I am quite enchanted with Ireland," she continued, as they crossed the hall. "But, Jerry, I am not pleased with *you*. You *promised* when I came to Castle Connaught you would send a real Irish jaunting-car to meet me, and instead of that I had —merely a landau, quite an ordinary landau. I was *so* disgusted! One might just as well be in England!"

"Oh," protested Annesley, as he led the way into the library, which opened out, with long windows, on to a delightful terrace, "believe me, Victoria, I

did my best for you; but the autocrat of the stables, Mr. Flynn, was so unfeignedly horrified at the idea of anything less than 'a pair' going to meet visitors of distinction to Castle Connaught, that I was obliged to give in. The autocrat made it a personal matter. It was a case between Mr. Flynn and the pair, or Castle Connaught without Mr. Flynn. However, you shall have the car to-morrow. Come, now, that's a bargain."

"Castle Connaught," said Victoria, smiling at him, 'is quite lovely. Jerry, I had no idea there was such beauty in Ireland."

Annesley was deeply gratified. To have her here, to see her so pleased with the home of which he was so fond and proud, was infinitely delightful to him.

"I know," he said, ringing the bell, "that you would like to see your room, and to rest before dinner. Dinner is at eight. I have told my housekeeper, Mrs. O'Callaghan, to have some tea ready for you in your room. I fancied you would prefer to have it there to-day. I have given you my mother's room, and the little boudoir that she was so fond of opens from the bedroom. Please tell me if there is anything else you would like, or any fault in their arrangements. The windows, I think, give you one of our best views, and perhaps Castle Connaught may have the honour of inspiring a new opera, or—something in that line."

Victoria went up to her room, and to the little boudoir, where Jerry's housekeeper had a dainty little tea and some delicious hot cakes all ready for her, and where the view from the windows was delectable enough to have delighted a less artistic person than she was.

She gazed out over the descending terraces of cut granite, to a large parterre of gaily hued flower-beds, set in the soft brilliant sward which already she had begun to mark as something peculiar, in the richness of its verdure, to Ireland. The farthest edge of the parterre was bounded by a dark belt of fir-trees, while a gleam of silvery river or lake glanced through the red trunks, and above and beyond all rose up the heather-covered hills, patched with rocky boulders and clumps of yellow gorse.

It was a fair, serene corner of the Irish land.

The daylight was dying fast, and the crows were swirling home to roost, all croaking together, like the people at the railway stations.

Victoria, with a long, wistful look at it all, tore herself away from the window. Her limbs felt weak and shaky as she lay down on the sofa in the boudoir, but in five minutes her eyes were closed, and she slept soundly for nearly two hours.

CHAPTER XX.

THE days that followed slipped by very rapidly. Annesley, true to a promise he had made Victoria had no one staying in the house except themselves. Once or twice he had a couple of men from the neighbouring garrison to dine and sleep, and Victoria meekly endured a dinner-party; but for the most part they were as free from "people, and bores," as she coolly expressed it, as possible.

Mr. Leathley amused himself satisfactorily with a little mild cub-hunting, and a good deal of mild shooting, chiefly partridge, with a turn or two at duck on the bog. Annesley devoted himself to the study of Victoria's wants and wishes, and Victoria gave herself up to the enjoyment of the present spell of rest and refreshment, and endeavoured to live from day to day without bothering about the future. She managed this so successfully, indeed, that as their visit drew to its inevitable close, a feeling of unfeigned regret at the prospect of bidding good-bye to this pleasant, peaceful, Irish home, and the pleasant, peaceful life, took a deep hold upon her.

When she rose on the last morning of their stay, and looked out at the now familiar view, she sighed with a qualm of something nearly approaching to sorrow at the thought of how very soon it would all be but a pleasant memory.

This last day at Castle Connaught was a calm grey autumn day. Victoria felt depressed—a physical as well as mental depression, impossible to shake off. She looked white at breakfast, Annesley thought, with a little surprise; for of late the fresh country air, that had a touch of the Atlantic brine mingled with the mountain breezes, had brought up a faint tinge of healthful pink into her pallid cheeks. She smiled slightly once or twice as she met Annesley's eyes fixed on her, but she was very silent, and he worried himself with the idea that the usual supply of good things at the morning meal were not quite to her taste.

Mr. Leathley, it was evident, was in a great hurry to get off for his last "go at the partridges," as he expressed it; for he was bolting his breakfast like a school-boy, and at a rate that would have made Mrs. Edmund Leathley give him a lecture on the dangers of indigestion—had she been present.

Annesley looked again at Victoria.

He turned to Mr. Leathley.

"I think," he said, "if you don't mind, I'll come back and lunch here, with Victoria—if she'll have me," he added, with a little smile.

Victoria smiled too—a small, fleeting smile.

"I told Orme and Huleat," pursued Annesley, 'that they could peg away this week as much as they liked, so we'll probably fall in with them, and I'll send some grub down with Paddy."

Orme and Huleat were two members of the neighbouring garrison, and Paddy was one of Annesley's under-keepers.

"Oh, Paddy!" exclaimed Mr. Leathley, who acquiesced good-humouredly in any arrangement, so

long as he got to his beloved partridges. "Paddy is a capital fellow. Paddy and I are great friends That chap's first-rate company, let me tell you."

"Then that's all right," said Annesley. "I'll come and start you all off; and then I thought we might either ride or walk to the top of the Rocky Valley. I want you to see that bit of view before you go."

He turned to Victoria as he said "we."

"Let us walk, Jerry," she said promptly.

Annesley looked delighted.

"By all means," he said at once. "I think it will be far jollier. But you're sure you'd rather not do anything else?—come with the guns, or anything?"

"Oh no," she said quickly. "Besides, I really must look after my packing this morning. You know how early we start to-morrow, and there is not so very much time before luncheon."

A shadow crossed Annesley's face. He stood up and went over to the sideboard. A minute or two passed before he spoke again.

"I sha'n't be later than half-past two," he said to Victoria, as he followed Mr. Leathley out of the room; "but don't wait luncheon for me, that's all."

He got back just as Victoria had, in obedience to his wish, finished luncheon. He told her that they had fallen in with Orme and Huleat, and that her father seemed to be having a really good time.

"Paddy," concluded Annesley, "told me this morning that, 'Be jabers, a man on a gallopin' horse wouldn't know Mr. Leathley from a raal

Irishman, he's that cheerful and gay in himself, and that free and pleasant with every one, bedad. And Parliament gents, faith, does be that set up in thimselves, the most of thim, they'd turn a horse from his oats with the consait of thim. There's Thady O'Shan, now—that's our mimber, and he gave the go-by to his own mother, bedad, he did, since the head was riz off of him by being a Parliament gint; an' he the son of O'Shan, that was the priest's own general man an' nothin' more! Just did up the garden, and yoked the pony.' Yes," added Annesley, "Paddy told me all that—and a good deal more; at least, he repeated it very often in different words."

Victoria laughed, and went off to put on her hat.

She found Annesley, on her return, on the terrace, leaning against one of the library windows, in the act of lighting a cigarette.

They started forthwith at a good brisk pace.

It was an ideal day for walking. The sun was not too hot, and the wind was not too cold. The roads were hard and dry, but free from dust, owing to the slight rain which had fallen the night before.

Annesley and Victoria walked on for a considerable distance, in silence.

One of the most restful things which Victoria found in being with him was that he didn't bore her with perpetual talk, or expect her to talk perpetually to him either. They were, indeed, on terms of friendship and familiarity so perfect that the horrible duty of making conversation was wholly unnecessary.

Just then they were both a good deal engrossed

with their own thoughts. And the thoughts of both were a good deal tinged with regret. Annesley's, indeed, were gloomy enough. A time of much enjoyment to him was at an end, and there was, so far as he could see, nothing left to look forward to. Every time he looked at Victoria he felt a tightness at his heart as he thought of how hopeless the future seemed. He realised now that her visit to Castle Connaught had been a mistake, because it would make him more discontented than ever with his home, and with his life, without her. Yet he would have given a good deal for the possibility of repeating the mistake for another few weeks.

Victoria's feelings, on the other hand, were scarcely less melancholy. She had brought herself to believe that if she could only stay here at Castle Connaught for ever she would be comparatively contented and happy. At least, she was convinced that a long spell of time spent in this quiet country place, utterly removed, as it was, from every association of her ordinary life, was the one thing needed to complete the eradication of those disturbing forces which of late had made her life intolerable. She was even persuaded that the process of eradication had already begun—that time, and an existence under such conditions as those of the present, would do the rest.

Victoria was making a mistake, but it is one that is made every day.

She was mistaking the numbness of feeling which is apt to supervene upon intense emotional excitement for the death of feeling itself.

Yet a lurking suspicion of insecurity troubled her, for she was ready to clutch at any plank of safety which seemed nearest.

As she walked on now with Annesley up the grey valley of stones under the purple hills, she could have cried aloud for a longer respite of time —precious time—in which to drive out the folly that possessed her. She loved Castle Connaught genuinely, because it had helped her, she believed, to do so. The prospect of losing its aid was all the more sad. She felt that she wanted every vestige of aid. She knew her own folly so excellently well

That is the best—or the worst—of a woman having a clear head, and a complex organisation.

Annesley took Victoria up a bit of the nearest hill, as he wanted her to get the view of the distant Atlantic which was to be obtained from a certain point on a low arm of the mountain. Their path was through clustering ridges of great bracken fern, the pathway itself having been made chiefly by the sheep and goats. When they reached the point of vantage, Victoria, resting on her stick, looked over seawards. Even the ocean lay still and grey on this still, grey day.

Quite in silence they both began to descend once more, Annesley walking in front of his companion, and giving her, from time to time, sundry warnings as to avoiding the rabbit-holes and loose stones' which made it very easy for unwary pedestrians to twist their ankles.

At the head of the Rocky Valley they sat down to rest.

Victoria leaned back comfortably in a delightful nest of heather, and gazed round her dreamily.

Annesley watched her from under the flap of his light-coloured tweed cap. He fancied she looked better, less tired and pale, than at breakfast.

"How *still* it is!" she said suddenly.

It was intensely still. Even the faint popping of guns which they had heard lower down in the valley, betokening that the shooters were still at work with the partridges, was out of earshot here. Here in the wide, solitary grey valley, not a sound broke the fragrant air, except the delicate, monotonous gurgling of a mountain streamlet at the opposite side of the rocky road. Far away, over towards their right, was a gleaming white cabin, a thin line of blue smoke going up quite straight from its crooked chimney in the roof of discoloured thatch.

Victoria's eyes followed the thin blue line absently.

Annesley, watching her unawares, sat very still. He would have given much to have been able to discover what her thoughts were as she sat there, with her eyes fixed on the white cabin.

He started at the sound of a young, shrill voice almost in his ear.

The owner of the voice was a barefooted young gentleman of about twelve summers, who was in charge of a cavalcade of three panniered donkeys, the heavy brown panniers being loaded with peat-sods. The cavalcade, followed by the gentleman in charge, came round the bend of the road, passing Annesley and Victoria closely. It was the sight of the former which had made the barefooted young gentleman lift up his voice so shrilly, and startle Annesley as he bade the donkeys to "Hould on ow a that!" while in the next breath he inquired affably "If his honour's lardship 'ud be wantin' a load o' turf?"

His honour's lordship did not happen to want a load of—probably his own—turf.

Such being intimated to the young gentleman, the latter politely demanded "a copper" for "standing on his head to amuse his honour's lady."

Annesley flung him sixpence, partly to get rid of him quickly, and partly because Victoria laughed and seemed quite delighted with his acrobatic performances. In return for such unwonted bounty, the young gentleman again stood on his head three times in succession, waving his bare brown feet enthusiastically in Victoria's face. He took his departure at length, after a prolonged stare at the latter out of his big, brown, velvety eyes, and a valedictory statement to the effect that—

"Sure, he'd lave his honour's lardship tha whole load o' turf for another saxpince and a pair av ould boots."

After this the silence remained unbroken again for a little while.

Victoria, whose lap was strewn with sprigs of the purple heather, pulled off her loose chamois gloves, and began to put the sprigs together deftly into a little posy. Annesley's eyes followed the movements of her small, firm, white fingers. She looked up suddenly into his face, and smiled.

"Well, Jerry, we'll remember this day, won't we? Do you know, you've given us a lovely time."

Annesley's heart beat quickly. A mist went before his eyes.

"Nonsense!" he said, almost brusquely. "I've done simply nothing worth speaking of."

He was trying to keep himself well in hand. The effort to do so hurt him more than even he would have imagined. He was wrestling with a mad longing to take the small broad hand next to him

that was holding the heather, and cover it with kisses. He thrust his own hand into the pocket of his coat, and kept it there with the fingers clenched, and see his teeth hard.

Victoria was not paying him any attention. The latter had been attracted, while he was speaking, to something on the wide, hilly road which wound upwards between the hills. She turned to Annesley with a sudden exclamation.

"I say, Jerry, what *can* that be coming along there in the distance?"

The words recalled Annesley to himself.

"Look!" said Victoria again quickly; and she pointed up towards the road as she said it.

He followed the direction of her outstretched hand. He knitted his brows together as he stared hard into the distance.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed, in a minute, "it's a procession of some sort."

He stood up as he spoke, and strained his eyes still farther, as a long stream of moving colour showing red, and blue, and green patches, wound slowly in and out on the high mountain road.

"Oh, look here," said Annesley, after a little pause, "it's a funeral, Victoria. They're coming from Ardmore, to Kilsallagh churchyard, by the mountain road. It's no end of a journey, but in Ireland a funeral always goes by the longest way. I think perhaps we'd better wait till they pass, before we move on."

Victoria nodded. She was standing up now, beside Annesley, and her eyes were fixed upon the advancing procession.

"How picturesque it is!" she murmured, half to herself, as it came closer.

"It's a young girl's funeral," said Annesley, lowering his voice, as the funeral train came closer. "Look, Victoria, don't you see, the bearers are young girls."

Then Victoria saw that the somewhat small coffin was being borne on the shoulders of six young girls.

Just as the procession came up to where they were standing, it paused, to allow a change of bearers. The latter were all brightly attired in their best dresses, the two foremost wearing crimson-coloured cashmeres and pink flowers in their black straw hats.

There were indeed none of the hideous trappings and suits of woe that Civilisation puts on to carry its loved ones to their last resting-place, in this humble funeral, here in the heart of the Irish mountains. Even the clustering blossoms of scarlet geranium, the purple and pink asters that were strewn without any formality of arrangement, but as if in a soft shower of pretty profusion, on the coffin-lid, did not seem incongruous.

It was the burial of youth and maidenhood; and the pathetic recognition of this, which every adjunct betrayed, was inexpressibly touching to Victoria.

Annesley, standing with his cap in his hand, as the coffin, with its flower-strewn lid, and its young, sad-faced bearers moved slowly past them, turned again to his companion.

"Victoria," he whispered softly, "do you think you would mind walking with them just to where the roads part? We generally do it in Ireland if we meet a country funeral—in fact, it's supposed to be very unlucky to meet a funeral on the road, and not to go a 'few steps on the way' with it."

Victoria assented at once, and they walked in the rear of the short procession to where the roads parted. From that point, Annesley and Victoria, still keeping in the valley, turned towards home.

Victoria, as she walked beside Annesley, with the purple heather in her hands, looked sad. He noticed quickly the tired curve of her lips, and he could have sworn that her usually cold, inscrutable eyes were dim with tears.

He drew a shade closer to her. And again, his heart began to beat heavily and very rapidly.

Some subtle communication of his agitation may have passed between them, for almost immediately Victoria made a perceptible effort to pull herself together. In a moment her face had resumed its normal expression of slightly sarcastic weariness.

But Annesley's agitation was not to be conquered so easily. He caught his breath quickly, and the colour paled in his face. He smiled then—a little, dry smile.

"Satisfactory world, ain't it?" he said suddenly.

The words, which had a sneer in them, seemed wrung involuntarily from him.

Victoria started as he spoke.

"What do you mean?" she said quickly.

She looked at him rather in surprise as she said it.

"Mean?" echoed Annesley, with the sneer still in his face. "Oh, God knows!"

He looked back at her, and her eyes fell. She was extremely unnerved at that moment, and all at once an intolerable tremor of nervousness shook the very centres of her being.

"Oh, Jerry, don't, *don't* go on like that!"—her voice had a cry of appeal in it, that showed her

weakness—"how can I—how can we help it all? Oh, what is the good of anything?"

She laughed bitterly, and the expression of her face changed.

"Oh, good gracious, what a goose I am, vapouring away like this at my age!"

The effort of her voice to get back to the ordinary coldness of its intonation roused Annesley.

His fair, sunburnt face flushed warmly; his voice, when he spoke, shook and quivered.

"Victoria"—he spoke fast, and imploringly—"Victoria, Victoria, *do* let me speak once more; *only* once more! Look here, there's no use beating about the bush. I *can't* get over it. I've done my best, God knows, but I can't. I don't want to worry you, or to persecute you, or to behave like a cad; but"—he drew in his breath sharply—"it's very hard. Of course, if you cared for any other fellow, I suppose I'd have to grin and bear it; but you don't. And what in God's name is the good of you and I drifting down our whole lives when we might be—together, and—get some good out of it all. It's not the same as it was the last time. You are secure now, and all that, and I should never try to interfere in any way. Let me, darling, let me make you happy. I *know* I could do it—if only you would let me try. I know I could, though I daresay you think it's jolly cheek for a one-horse chap in the way of brains to say so to a great swell like you Let me try, Victoria; give me a chance. Why should you be so afraid, my darling? Goodness knows you know me, and I know you well enough! It's not like an acquaintance of yesterday; and I don't fancy I'm a fellow to

change. You do rather like me, don't you? and we always hit it off like anything together. Why should you be afraid?"

"Oh, I'm not afraid," exclaimed Victoria; "only —give me time to think."

She stopped and sat down suddenly on a bit of a low wall, and covered her face with her hands. He waited patiently for a while. At last he sat down beside her, and drew her hands into his own. She did not resist him. All power of resistance seemed to have gone out of her.

Everything at the moment was in chaos about her.

Only, above the chaos, words of one who was older, and, she believed now, wiser than herself, rang once more in her ear,—

"Perhaps some day you will find, as many a woman has found, that a safe, comfortable marriage cuts the black knot of a woman's difficulties in the only effectual and permanent way."

Would it not be well to seek relief and safety in the way that her dear old friend had said was the only safe and permanent one?

She would be safe with Jerry, if ever woman was safe with man. Would it not be well therefore?

Quite suddenly a wild impulse seized her to tell Annesley once for all about Loevio.

But the impulse died as it sprang into existence.

How could she tell him?

Loevio had never yet dared to speak openly to her. She knew he loved her. For what is speech between a man and a woman who love each other? But, all the same, she could not tell

Annesley of it. There are things that a woman cannot tell.

And in the meantime Annesley still held her hands in his, and gazed at her pleadingly.

She let her hands remain thus, clasped warmly in his, without any feeling of repugnance.

She had no feeling of repugnance to him at any time, except, indeed, when he looked at her with a certain expression in his eyes. But now, at this time, even this failed to repel her.

Presently she even allowed him to raise her hands and hold them against his breast; she was quite silent, and made no attempt to resist him when he drew her closer to him, and, with his head bent towards hers, said again,—

"Victoria, darling, give me the chance. Don't be afraid to trust me."

She looked up into his honest, pleading eyes with her own little cold, dark ones, and she drew her hands away quickly.

"I—I will do anything you like."

Her voice was hoarse as she uttered the words, and her face went white—as white as death. She stood up and shrank away from him when, as the colour rushed into his face, he stretched out his hands towards her, and a little, sharp cry broke from his lips.

"Wait!" Annesley's voice, as he uttered the one short word, regained its usual quietness. "Don't please look so scared, as if you would like to run away. I sha'n't do a *thing* you don't like. Only tell me once more, Victoria, that you really do mean it truly.

And Victoria said she did mean it.

He caught her hands again, and held them against his breast.

"God helping me, you shall never regret it."

She smiled, as he said it—an odd little, wan smile.

"I say, Victoria" (with a sudden change of tone), "I want you, there's a dear, to give me a bit of that heather."

He just touched the sprays of it which she had stuck in her belt.

He released her hands, and she took a sprig or two out of her belt and held them towards him with a hand that shook a good deal. Annesley took the hand and the heather a fast prisoner in his own.

"I want you," he said again coaxingly, "to fasten it in my coat; here's the button-hole," he added, guiding her fingers up to it at the same time.

Victoria laughed; but it was a faint, tremulous laugh.

"Do you know, Jerry, it strikes me we are growing uncommonly silly! Fancy you going on like a man in a book, the regular, orthodox ——" She paused, and her face did flush ever so little, as Jerry coolly added,—

"Lover, Victoria. Well, look here, dearest, I've been wanting to be an orthodox lover for years and years, and upon my soul it's rough on a chap to be jeered at just when he gets an innings at last. Now you'll fasten that heather in as a punishment for your sins."

She looked at him as she pulled the sprigs of heather through his button-hole.

"Oh, Jerry, my sins; you don't know the half of my sins!"

"*Darling!*" said Annesley contentedly, as if the contemplation of her sins would add the one element of perfection to his existence.

"Upon my word, you're easily pleased," pursued Victoria. "Yes, you are. Well, don't blame me if by-and-by you find I'm a whited sepulchre. Remember, this is not *my* doing. There, there's your precious bit of heather fixed in now. It looks rather well against the light tweed."

She put her head on one side and contemplated it critically.

"Do you know, Jerry, you haven't bad taste at all in tweeds. I'm so glad, for I don't think I could stand it if you had. I can stand a good deal, but there's a limit. Don't laugh like that; it's very serious. Now, look here, my dear boy, don't you think it's about time we went home? If we don't turn up pretty soon you'll have my respected father and the bellman of the locality—if there is a bellman—and *all* your servants scouring the country for the long-lost che-ild. Come on, Jerry!"

"I'd like to stay here for ever!" said Annesley regretfully.

"Should you? Well, *I* shouldn't. *Come on*, Jerry! Don't try to be sentimental, dear boy—you're not built that way."

Annesley laughed.

"Well, I suppose it *is* about time we went home—my home and yours, eh, Victoria?"

He slipped his hand through her arm as he said it, and drew her close to his side. But he didn't dare kiss her—yet.

She smiled up in his face quite brilliantly. The

prospect of Castle Connaught as a home was very grateful to her. She loved the fair Irish place which had given her a way of escape. Already the release from the strain of indecision was delightful—quite delightful.

The shadows were beginning to fall heavily, and a faint, roseate flush under the grey canopy of cloud showed that the sun was sinking to rest when Victoria and Annesley crossed the park at Castle Connaught once more. Throughout the homeward walk Victoria had scarcely listened to what Annesley was saying; but the sense of his presence, and the warm pressure of his hand on hers, gave her a feeling of security and protection. For the first time in her life she craved protection; for the first time in her life she was grateful for it.

She told herself that the man beside her deserved well at her hands. She assured herself that she meant to do well in the future which lay before them both. Altogether, the future looked satisfactory. It might have all been so much worse! Victoria thought of that now.

There comes a point in the lives of most people when the thought of how much better things might be is superseded by the thought of how much worse they might easily be; and a feeling of thankfulness that they are not worse alters and colours the current of hopes and wishes.

Victoria had—nearly—reached this point now. It is the point where youth departs and maturity enters upon its steadier course. There are compensations to be found even in maturity.

Victoria had nearly reached this point—nearly not quite, for, as the gates of the courtyard clanged

behind herself and Annesley, a swift reaction of thought became in a moment a quick and horrible revulsion of feeling; for, to her overstrained fancy, the sharp reverberation of the clanging iron bars and locks was the echo of her own imprisonment.

Oh, why had she done this? Why should she do this? How could she be mad enough to make herself a prisoner with her own hands?

In one second all the fair prospect of the future became intolerable.

And just because Annesley, in his haste, let the gate swing to, till it slammed violently behind them, that absurd trifle changed the whole face of things.

An absurd trifle. But then, so much in life is made up of absurd trifles!

Victoria shivered; she felt cold all in a moment. Annesley, looking at her when they entered the warm, softly-lighted hall, wondered at the extreme pallor of her face. His love, which was throbbing with every beat of his heart, and coursing through his veins only too strongly, almost broke down every barrier of prudence.

"You are tired," he exclaimed quickly, and speaking in a low and very tender voice. "Darling, darling, you have walked too far!"

"Oh no," said Victoria hurriedly; "no, no, not in the least. Don't fuss, Jerry, there's a dear! Let me go and rest."

And she escaped from him before he dared touch her, and fled away up the staircase.

CHAPTER XXI.

VICTORIA was in perfectly wild spirits the next day.

During the entire journey up to Dublin she rallied Annesley and her father in a fashion that reduced them both to incessant fits of helpless laughter.

Annesley, who was going only as far as Dublin, was inclined to be gloomy at the contradictory engagements which just at that moment entailed his presence at Castle Connaught, and debarred him from seeing anything of Victoria for some weeks to come. But it was useless to attempt anything like a regretful sadness with Victoria sitting opposite to him, and hurling one nonsensical sally after another at him from the corner of the railway carriage.

"I am so glad you're Irish!" she said to him, quite suddenly. "It suits me so much better, you see. *You* don't mind my being a little mad now and then. Because Irish people are all a little mad, aren't they?"

Annesley only laughed helplessly.

"Oh, don't laugh, Jerry. You've no idea how comfortable the prospect is to me! I assure you it's nothing to laugh at. Now to-morrow, when I'm in England, I shall feel quite proper and sober again. To-morrow!" She bit her lips, and her smile ended in a sigh. "What a bore to-morrow will be!"

"Will it?" said Annesley eagerly. "Will it really, Victoria?"

Mr. Leathley, seeing Annesley's face as he spoke, took a sudden resolution. He was a man and a brother, he told himself, and he had the fellow-feelings of a man and a brother. He'd do his best for old Jerry under the circumstances.

He knew they had an hour or two to spare in Dublin. They had no sooner arrived once more at the Shelbourne Hotel than he declared he must go out. He wanted, he said, to buy a silk muffler. He had no silk muffler with him; and it was very cold, he said, and he couldn't possibly cross over to England that evening without a muffler.

"All right," said Victoria. "I'll come with you."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," said her father authoritatively; for had he not the feelings of a man and a brother? "You'll stay where you are, and rest yourself."

Victoria looked at him as he said it.

Annesley was afraid to speak.

Victoria twirled round on one foot.

"Oh! So I'm to rest?" she said coolly. "Very well Jerry, you may as well rest too. Look here, I've a good mind to race you to the end of the corridor. I believe they've given us a sitting-room away down there—ninety-one, or two, or three, or something." She looked down the long, empty passage as she spoke. "Do you dare me to race you, Jerry?"

Annesley only smiled and shook his head.

Victoria laughed.

"Don't buy large flowers on the pattern of your muffler," she said to her father. "If you do I won't travel with you. Now, then, Jerry, are you ready

to run? I don't believe you *can* run one little bit You *should*, you know. You'll get too fat, Jerry."

Nevertheless, all the time she was saying it she was walking quite staidly down the passage, with Annesley beside her. "This is the room, I think. '*Leastways*,' if it ain't, they can turn us out. Now, I'm going to rest and be thankful, as the advertisements say."

She sat down at one end of the sofa.

"It's not a bad little room, is it?" she continued, looking up in his face. "I could make it quite pretty; but hotel-rooms ——"

He seated himself beside her, and tried to capture her hands.

"Darling," he began quickly, "it's maddening to think of your going away just like this! I have so much to say to you, and to ask you!"

"Have you, Jerry? Well, I'll tell you how to do it. Write it all down on ruled paper, with Q. and A., you know, alternately—first your question and then a blank space for the answer—and send the papers to me, and I'll fill 'em up 'to the best of my ability, sir,' as the servants say when you, hire them."

He laughed—he couldn't help it; and Victoria drew away from him a little. The next moment she found him looking at her wistfully. She smiled into his eyes with a softer, kinder little smile than any which he had seen there yet. His heart beat quicker.

"Victoria," he began again—and he got hold of her hands successfully this time—"you are bewildering to a poor fellow like me. My sweetest, I wanted to tell you——"

Victoria flung his hands off, and jumped up. "Oh, I *can't*," she said to herself. "N.B., not to sit on a sofa again. It's a good thing to remember. I'm stupid about it; but then, I've never been *engaged* before. Oh, *what* a beast I am, to be sure! But——"

She seated herself at the table in the middle of the room.

Annesley was standing now, but he made no attempt to follow her. Something in his attitude, and in the turn of his head, touched Victoria to the quick.

"Jerry!" he started and looked round at the sound of her voice. "Don't stand a hundred miles away. Come round here and talk comfortably."

'I *will* be good this time," she added to herself.

He came round and stood beside her.

Victoria laid a hand on his sleeve.

"Now go on with what you wanted to say."

He clasped the hand which rested on his sleeve with one of his own, and looked down into her up-turned eyes.

Victoria began to laugh softly again.

Annesley's face cleared.

"You're the most provoking——" he said, laughing himself as he said it.

"Oh yes, I know I am," she returned, with perfect composure. "I always was. You'll have to put up with it, Jerry. At least, don't, if you don't like. I offer you your liberty, Jerry. There! I offer it to you. Take it, and never see my face again! Isn't that melodramatic and splendid? What? You won't? Misguided man! They always say misguided man in melodramas—misguided man——

oh—er—where was I, and what did I mean to say next? I've forgotten. Well, it don't matter much."

Annesley's hand pressed hers. She allowed him to press it quite meekly.

"Look here, darling," he began gently, "I wanted to talk to you about the future."

She uttered a little groan.

"Oh, Jerry, the future. Oh, bother the future! And the future *is* a bother. Let us stick to the present. Oh, Jerry, I shall often think of dear Ireland, and the good time I've had now."

"You *do* like Ireland?" he broke in quickly.

"I adore Ireland, Jerry."

He smiled, only too well pleased.

"But, darling, remember that you must never bore yourself to be here more than you like. I want you to understand, my dearest, that you are to be perfectly free—I mean, after our marriage. You must just come to Ireland whenever you like. I haven't the smallest intention of cooping you up for ever and ever at Castle Connaught. We shall be as much as possible in London.

She interrupted him quickly.

"London—I *hate* London! No, no, Jerry, give me Castle Connaught, whatever you do, for my abode."

"I do believe," he said, smiling at her warmly, 'that you are downright in love with Castle Connaught."

Victoria nodded.

"I am, Jerry; absolutely in love with Castle Connaught."

"It's evident," returned Annesley, and he smiled again, "that I'm to take a back seat."

"*You!*" said Victoria. "You are nothing. Jerry, you are a deluded man. You're like a man in a three-volume novel, and I'm a cold-hearted, calculating creature, a mercenary monster, and I'm marrying you for your castle and broad-lands. Isn't that how they put it? Yes, think of that, Jerry—you're going to marry a cold, calculating creature!"

She clasped her hands in front of her on the table and shook her head. Annesley laughed with complete relish. Victoria shook her head despairingly.

"I can't get you to realise your position, Jerry."

"My darling," he exclaimed quickly, "I cannot indeed realise my own good fortune. I cannot realise yet, Victoria, that you really are mine at last."

"Ah!" murmured Victoria mournfully, "yours at last! It sounds like the end of a love-letter, Jerry. By the way, Jerry, don't expect *me* to write love-letters. I couldn't do such a thing, not to save my life. And as to undertaking to write a letter once a week, my dear boy, I wouldn't undertake to write a letter once a week to the Queen—not if she entreated me her own self. I couldn't, really!"

Annesley caught her clasped hands in his and kissed them again and again.

"You're incorrigible," he said, when he could speak again for laughing, "you perfect, heavenly darling!"

Victoria, getting her hands free once more, leaned back in her chair.

"How nice," she said composedly, "to have all that settled, and to think that I'm a perfect, heavenly darling! Well, you're the first to find out that I am at all *heavenly*, Jerry."

She sat up and, leaning her elbows on the table, rested her chin on the palms of her hands.

"Now, Jerry, *do* attend, please; and—no, don't. Do leave off trying to grab my hands. This is serious. I'm going to reform you, dear boy. First of all, I want you, like a dear, not to wear that hat again. Oh, Jerry, I *can't* marry a man who wears a brown billycock hat. I can't. I know nice people do wear brown billycock hats; but I can't stand them, Jerry, and I can't have you wear 'em. If you love me, Jerry, wear a black one."

"I'll go and buy a black one now," said Annesley quite seriously.

He made a step in the direction of the obnoxious brown one as he spoke.

Victoria calmly caught his sleeve.

"It's *so* dear of you, Jerry, to take it like that; but you needn't bother about it now, because you're not going to wear your hat in the house, I suppose, and I sha'n't have much more time to look at you before we start."

His face turned white as she uttered the last words.

"It is going so quickly, the time!" he said, and his voice shook. As he spoke he knelt down beside her chair. Victoria's face grew whiter than his own as his arms went round her. She felt sick and faint; but she fought with both, and conquered, or thought she did. Annesley's lips were close to hers. She threw back her head with a gesture of intolerable impatience. She could feel his arms trembling as they held her, his quick, hot breath on her cheek.

"Oh, Jerry, Jerry, I—I *am* rather tired. Don't *smother* me, please!"

She tried to laugh as she said it, but the attempt was a miserable failure. She was not aware of how

plainly her repugnance to his first attempt at a caress showed itself. Annesley, with his arms round her, looked into her face once more, as she uttered the faint, protesting words. His own face flushed, but he withdrew his arms quite gently.

"Smother you!" he exclaimed, as lightly as he could. "Poor darling, of course not!"

And as he said it, she found herself released completely. He rose and walked round to the opposite side of the table. And he had not kissed her—not once!

Victoria looked up at him where he stood—looked full into the kind face, which smiled with honest good-nature as it met her gaze.

A big lump rose in her throat. His face became suddenly all blurred in the dimness that filled her eyes. She pushed back her chair violently, and in another second she was standing before him, close to him. She stretched out her hands impulsively, and caught a button of his coat. Her voice was low and shaking as she spoke.

"Oh, Jerry, you are a *dear*, and I *know* I shall—love you—awfully—some day!"

The two last words were barely whispered. Annesley could have scarcely heard them. For as they were uttered Victoria raised her head, and, of her own free will, kissed him once with hot, quivering lips. She flushed scarlet as her mouth touched his face, and her hands pushed him from her immediately with all their force.

Annesley's eyes shone. Every pulse in his body leaped like mad at the touch of that kiss on his cheek. The throbbing in his ears deafened him for the moment. He drew her to him again, without

resistance from her this time, and kissed her more than once. Her lips turned deadly white under the passion of his kisses, but he noticed nothing, saw nothing, felt nothing, but the mad throbbing of his veins.

They were the kisses he had dreamt of for years, and they were sweet—no wonder that they were sweet.

But all the same they were not one half so sweet as the one small fleeting kiss which her lips had given him of their own sweet will.

Victoria was very pale when the door opened and her father came in. He came in whistling the refrain of a popular song, and smiling blandly.

"Well, Jerry, my boy, I've got my comforter. Capital comforter, too!—No, you sha'n't see it. If you do you'll find fault with the pattern."

This was added to Victoria, as she ran up to him and cuddled her arm through his.

Mr. Leathley chuckled.

"It's stripes," he said, pinching her ear. "You like stripes, don't you?—blue, and red, and black, I think. Now won't that please your highness, hey? Tell you what, Jerry, Dublin's a capital place to get a comforter—a *capital* place, my dear fellow!"

And then he walked away, and grinned at his own reflection in the looking-glass.

CHAPTER XXII.

"VICTORIA," Conway Keppel remarked languidly, in reply to a question which had just been put to him, "Victoria at the present moment is being interviewed."

The person to whom he imparted this information uttered a little snort, either signifying impatience or disapproval.

"Ye-es," pursued Mr. Keppel reflectively; "this is, let me see, well—I fancy something like the fifth or sixth interview since last July."

A second voice, a voice with brisk, acid tones, broke in here ruthlessly on the speaker's smooth accents.

"I wish," said the owner of the second voice, "that they wouldn't wear all the flesh off her bones amongst them. She is looking abominably delicate. I was watching her this morning, and she ate *no* breakfast."

"My dear Aunt Doll, how could she? How could any one eat breakfast, and at the same time make up answers for the coming questions—I mean the coming interviewer?—besides the difficult calculation as to which of one's most fetching frocks one should select in which to fetch the wary one? Breakfast! *You* wouldn't eat any breakfast if a business-like woman, with a black note-book, was coming presently to ask you questions and take

down your answers—and take down, in her mind's eye, all the weak points in your careful toilette I assure you you wouldn't."

"Bah!" said the other quickly. "The whole system is nauseating."

"Which?" inquired Mr. Keppel coolly. "The breakfast or the interview?"

Miss Payne deigned no reply. Her silence was more eloquent—far more eloquent, in her case—than speech.

"Hum!" pursued the first speaker. "Fame is the glory of life. What is Fame? Victoria is famous—quite, quite famous. There is no possible doubt about *that*. Did I tell you that some months ago Ada had the pleasure of hearing 'Sappho's Song' at Brighton—on a piano-organ? Oh yes, a loud, relentless piano-organ, warranted to work away at the rate of ten miles an hour, and to play everything half a tone flat, and half a bar out of time. And now the man who plays the cornopean outside our house in Chester Square on rainy days, *always* on rainy days—query, why do men who play the cornopean always play it in the rain? 'Pon my word, it would be an interesting study—say for the silly season: 'Men who play the cornopean.' However, this especial cornopeanist has now got 'Sappho's Song,' with the semitones mostly left out, wedged in between 'Oh, Mr. Porter' and 'God bless the Prince of Wales!' The effect is what young ladies would call weird. Very much so, when the rain gets into his whistle—I mean his cornopean. I mention all this because this is Fame. Fame! Think of that."

He spread out his hands and looked over at Miss Payne. Plainly the latter was pursuing a line of thought which she had no intention of revealing. Mr. Keppel took up his parable once more.

"The interview is the latest resource of civilisation. It also is Fame. Victoria and Fame are synonymous; therefore, Victoria must tell the dear, patient public, all agog for the news, whether she likes strawberry jam, or approves of your powdering your nose, or believes Beethoven and Wagner are entirely over-rated, and Thingumy Tolero, the last new composer, and her (supposed) deadly enemy, quite under-rated. While all the time the officer of the new inquisition will be looking her over carefully from her—her fringe-net to her shoes and stockings, and adding up what Mr. Mantalini has been pleased to call 'the demnition total.' We live in an enlightened age. This is the charming device—one of the charming devices—of an enlightened age. Ada—Ada's an original little girl in her way—Ada declares it's the Nemesis of humanity, for humanity's cruelty to the brute creation. She says we thump and kick our oxen, and our asses, and our horses; we pull open their mouths and count their teeth, and dig 'em in the ribs, and catch 'em by the nose, and clip 'em, and cut 'em, and mutilate them; and then we send them to a hell upon earth (to them) in the shape of an exhibition or showyard, where every one else may go and do likewise to them, just that every one may say what fine cattle *we* keep. That's Ada's reading. 'Pon my soul, I'm inclined to—she's not here, is she? No. Well, I'm inclined to

agree with her. I always do agree with Ada—behind her back. Now, you see, our first-prize, best-selected showyard human animals are brought to the torturer, or, at least, the torturer brings himself or herself to them, and we have *our* teeth counted, and our virtues and our vices—beyond all things, our vices—to say nothing of our incomes, counted (in public). Yes, everything is counted carefully—even the hairs of our head are all numbered—by the modern interviewer."

"Conway," interrupted Miss Payne sharply, "be good enough to refrain from open profanity, if you please, in *my* hearing."

"Great goddess Fame!" pursued Mr. Keppel unabashed. "It is well said thou art a lady. What will not a lady undergo in thy service! Even being interviewed. There was a lull, Aunt Doll, in the onslaught after the first fond scamper last summer, when, I am given to understand, they were shoving one another off the doorstep at Rutland Gardens; there was a lull, until the announcement of Victoria's engagement to Jerry Annesley. Then they began all over again. At least, the 'ladies' journals' started with renewed zest. Engaged! The word still has charms—for ladies' journals. Four ladies' papers wrote and asked Jerry for his photograph. *Jerry*, fancy old Jerry! He told them (I have it from himself) to go and be da——. Ten thousand pardons, Aunt Doll! It was rude and naughty—yes, you're quite right, it was; but Jerry said it, not I. But, bless you, they were quite willing to go and be da——, do what he wished, I mean—*after* they had got his photograph. Oh, they got it, by hook or by crook—crook probably;

for, like that immortal child who takes such delight in Pears' Soap, they wouldn't be happy till they got it, and get it they did. I hope they're happy now. I hope Jerry's happy, too."

Miss Payne sighed.

"Whatever they are all doing," she said angrily, "they're killing the child amongst them. I shall be thankful when Jerry has got her safe and sound at Castle Connaught, away from them all."

Mr. Keppel shook his head impressively.

"Don't you flatter yourself that 'll stop 'em. By George! they'll be off like—like a pack o' harriers after the 'newly-wedded pair,' as they will fondly call them."

"Her little white face," continued his auditor, if such a word can be fitly applied to one who was not listening to one word he said, "drives me wild. *Bother* the Music and the Fame, and" (with a weak descent into generalities) "*everything*! I wish Jerry would run away with her. I do, with all my heart."

Conway Keppel clasped his hands round his knee, and rocked himself slowly to and fro.

"Won't do, Aunt Doll. She wouldn't run away with him—with the trousseau only half finished. Couldn't do such a thing. You take my word for it, Aunt Doll, it's the trousseau's at the bottom of the mischief. Music—even interviewers—are not in it with the trousseau. Oh, that trousseau! It's *wearing* at the price. Don't glare at me, Aunt Doll, I am *not* attempting a pun. It's much too serious. You see, *I* know all about it. I used to think Ada'd never live through *her* trousseau. I remember telling her, in a voice broken with

emotion, as the heroes speak in ladies' novels, that I looked forward on our wedding-day to conveying her mortal remains, and nothing more, away with me. I remonstated, I implored, I reasoned. No use. Ada said it was 'mamma,' and mamma said 'Of course dear Ada was devoted to her little frocks and things.' I don't know whether you saw the little frocks and things, but I imagine that they would have furnished forth the female population of a—say the Scilly Isles—and had a few odds and ends over for poor curates' families. Oh, I know what it is to marry a trousseau! Jerry will know what it is before he's done with it. He'll know what it is to get into a long tunnel of—er—petticoats, and get out at the other end. And one is quite helpless. I remember how, in the innocent ardour of youth, I said *I'd* get Ada—er—petticoats, for instance, after we were married, that indeed in very truth I would be quite willing to buy her a pair of boots, or two pairs of boots—I did indeed. I said I should be quite willing to clothe my wife I even went farther, and said I'd give her a fair share at Madame White's, or Madame Black's, or Green's, or any other of those infernal humbugs in Bond Street or Regent Street, if she liked. But no, she didn't like it at all, *then*; though I'm bound to say I've once or twice regretted that offer since. Oh no. I had to marry the trousseau, and so will Jerry. Why—hullo! here's the victim herself."

Victoria came across the room to Aunt Doll. She looked white and fragile enough to justify Aunt Doll's strictures upon her looks, and her face was haggard and very tired about the eyes.

"Well," exclaimed Mr. Keppel, standing up. "So

you have escaped from the snare of the fowler?"

Victoria, who held an open letter in her hand, smiled very faintly. It was evident she was not going to talk about herself. Perhaps because she had been talking almost exclusively about herself for nearly an hour.

"I am afraid," she said, sitting down beside Aunt Doll on the settee, "that Gertrude will be rather disappointed. This"—she shook the open letter—"is rather a squencher. You see"—turning to Miss Payne—"it's this thing at the Institute. We thought we'd try skirt-dancing as a novelty. It's so hard to get the men to wake up to an interest in the Institute. So I said I'd ask Cora Willoughby to come down and dance for us."

"Sir John's daughter?" inquired the elder lady at this point.

Victoria nodded.

"Yes. And first she said she'd be delighted; but now, if you please, she declares she won't dance unless we can manage a special limelight-and mirrors sort of arrangement on the stage—I mean the platform—for a *rainbow* effect, or something. And she wants to bring down a Miss Somebody-Something too, a dancer whom I've never *heard* of, who coaches her, and who has something to do in the rainbow effect. I'm sure I don't understand. She really thinks——Oh, Ada, is that you?"—as Mrs. Conway Keppel walked in. "She really thinks——"

"A good many shakes of herself," Mr. Keppel interpolated, putting up his eye-glass at the same time, and staring critically at his wife.

It's too perfectly absurd of her!" cried Victoria.

"As to the dancing woman, Gertrude would never stand the dancing woman in the house. What a bother it is! Now isn't Cora too absurd, Aunt Doll?"

Miss Payne coughed drily.

"Pray don't ask *me*, my dear. In *my* day young women of good family and decent reputation were not in the habit of kicking up their heels on public platforms for the entertainment of every Tom, Dick, and Harry who should choose to pay a shilling to see them do it. In *my* day persons from—er——"

"The 'alls,'" Mr. Keppel interpolated again.

Miss Payne frowned.

"*Such* persons," she concluded sharply, "were not the chosen associates of young ladies, nor the guests in respectable country houses."

Conway Keppel smiled delightedly.

"Oh, the 'alls,'" he said mischievously, "aren't bad. As a rule, you'd find 'em quite harmless. We had one of 'em at the Cameron-Curtises. She came down to breakfast in a tea-gown I remember and her sleeves were only down to her elbows; her face was *rather* heavily powdered, for the morning; but she really was as harmless as—the wife of a bishop. She didn't even smoke, Aunt Doll!"

Miss Payne didn't speak. Her lips were tightly compressed. Conway Keppel smiled again.

"Now, you know," he continued blandly, "Cora Willoughby won't do without her little smoke. She takes it in the form of those little harmless Brilliantines, and she must have 'em, too, put in her room for her wherever she stays. She can pull through a couple of them at a time. She's under the impression, poor little dear, like so many of them,

that she can smoke. She can't smoke. You give her half a quarter of an ounce of cut Cavendish, in a little briar pipe, and in ten minutes she couldn't tell you which end of her was uppermost. As to six whiffs of a fairly reasonable cigar, it would blow her head off. However, be sure you get the Brilliantines for her. She gets them everywhere."

"She wouldn't get them in *my* house," said the tall old lady on the settee, jerking her knitting-needles viciously.

She knitted quantities of scarlet woollen kneecaps and garters for old women, and the long, scarlet garter upon which she was engaged at present lay coiled in and out on her lap like a fiery serpent.

"Humph!" with a grim smile. "She'd get a right good whipping; that's what she'd get, if she were *my* daughter."

"Oh, I say," exclaimed Conway, dropping his eyeglass in his amusement, "I'd give a ten-pound note to see Aunt Doll spanking Cora! You wouldn't have the heart to do it, Aunt Doll, after one look from Cora's grey eyes."

A little shadow of a shade swept over Ada Keppel's fair young face. She looked, indeed, very young and fair. It was almost impossible, looking at her, to realise that she had been married more than two years, and was the mother of a remarkably fine baby.

"Her eyes," continued Conway, "are simply *indescribable.* Sometimes they're positively green, you know. And can't she play the very devil with them just! Ada, don't you think Cora Willoughby's eyes are extraordinary, extraordinarily fascinating? Eh, what? You do? Yes, I should think so. All

the same, she's a conceited little donkey. Moreover, besides the delusion about smoking, she's under the impression that she can *dance*. Well, she can't, candidly. But she manages her *mise en scène* so consummately that she deceives a good many people into thinking that, if she wanted to, she could get her living by it at the 'Empire.' Limelight and mirrors! Absurd! Just like her cheek! Heigh-ho! That sort of woman is all very well, now and then—like ortolans—but they're altogether quite too—too highly flavoured for human nature's daily food."

"Well, but what's to be done?" asked Victoria, with a wearied, worried note in her voice.

"Done!" echoed Conway. "Nothing. Ten chances to one, if that little minx discovers you can do without her, and that you mean to do without her, she'll write you two dozen gushing lines, all round capitals and notes of admiration to say that her only pleasure in life at present will be to dance a skirt dance or a shawl dance or to kick up her heels, as Aunt Doll incisively puts it, for the dear rustics in Eastaston village. Oh, my dear Victoria, you 'let her come to,' as my old nurse used to say, long ago."

There was, indeed, no other course open.

Nevertheless, Mr. Keppel's predictions seemed for once at fault. Perhaps Miss Cora Willoughby was past "coming to," or perversely bent upon not "coming to." Anyhow, she didn't *come to* Eastaston, and Mrs. Edmund Leathley was unfeignedly vexed, and Victoria was, privately, quite indifferent; and, failing skirt-dancing, the amusement of the rustic remained for a time undecided as to what form it would take.

CHAPTER XXIII.

BUT the stars in their courses fought for Mrs. Edmund Leathley. Not the stars of the "Halls." Oh no! But other stars, and one in especial, of purest light and finest magnitude.

Victoria, coming down to breakfast a few days later, found her sister-in-law beaming forth an arrowy smile on all assembled, from behind the silver urn.

She cried out in an unwonted fever of excitement when Victoria appeared.

"My dear Victoria, *such* a delightful thing has happened, you can't think!"

Victoria, in the sight of one person present, at any rate, looked far from equal to thinking of much.

"Yes," continued Mrs. Edmund Leathley. "I don't know when I was so pleased at anything. And I mean to let Cora Willoughby know what she has missed. She has been *dying* to meet Loevio, and now she could have met him here—could have *stayed in the house* with him—if she had chosen to behave like a lady. Your coffee, Victoria?"

Victoria glanced up. She had grown several shades paler, if that were possible.

"Thanks," she said, almost faintly, drawing the coffee-cup to her. "What—what do you mean, Gertrude?"

"I mean this," returned the latter, delightedly and excitedly. "Mr. Loevio" (the emphasis was

nearly ecstatic) "has written me such a *charming* letter! It's here somewhere." She rustled through the bundle of letters that lay on the table-cloth beside her. "What? No? Dear me, I can't find it now. Well, never mind, he has offered—*offered*, Victoria!—to come and sing two songs for me at the Institute. He says he is due at Sandringham—yes, at Sandringham—on the seventeenth, and he could give us the two days following. He says he fancied I might like it. *So* modest of him to put it in that way! And he was so delicate in putting it, too, that of course he would sing *merely* for his own pleasure—quite—er—unprofessionally. It is *too* delightful. I shall draw up a new programme at once. Fancy a man like that taking so much trouble! The way in which he speaks in his letter (oh, I wish I had it here!) about his intense interest in the welfare of Art, and the progress of Art among the classes not so well placed as ourselves, is quite touching—quite poetical! Cora Willoughby will grind her teeth with rage. Now, Victoria, between *your* violin solos *and* Loevio's songs, the Institute will become famous."

Victoria did not speak.

Her brother Hugh called out to her from the side-board, as his sister-in-law's rapturous accents ceased.

"Hi, Victoria, what are you going to have in the way of breakfast? Kidney and bacon, old girl, or cold veal pie? Or do you want to stick to boiled eggs, or what? Here, shout out quick, like a good girl."

Victoria started, and looked dazed.

"Cold veal kidney!" she exclaimed lucidly. "Yes, no—anything you like! At least, I think I'm going to have an egg and bread-and-butter, or toast."

"Cold veal kidney!" roared Hugh. "Oh, I say! Cold veal kidney! Here, you people, would any one get Miss Victoria Leathley some cold veal kidney?"

He capered round and round with a very substantial plateful of cold veal pie for his own consumption. Victoria got an egg, and a scrap of dry toast.

When she left the breakfast-room, a little later, the top of the egg had been chipped off, and the dry toast was broken into little pieces on her plate.

She thought she would *never* get away—never hear the last of her sister-in-law's raptures. But in the end she did manage to escape.

Alone in her dear turret-room she could give way to the distraction which overwhelmed her.

"Coming *here*!" she murmured to herself. "Oh, my God, why—*why* does he come here? Can't he leave me in peace? It is so cruel to pursue me when he *knows* that I am not free. I wish I had never seen him. I really *don't* like him now, because, even if he does care, he has no right to show it, when I—when Jerry—he has no earthly right. It's not gentlemanly either. Only"—her face, even in solitude, flushed rosy red—"I suppose it *is* hard on him, too. And he knows that *I* know, and—that I —*care*. I—I am such a *fool*! I know what I will do. I will go away before this wretched concert. I don't care what any of them may think. I shall go up to town, or perhaps to Paris, to the St. Johns. They *have* asked me. I will tell Gertrude—to-morrow, yes, to-morrow."

The morrow came, but Victoria did not tell Gertrude.

One, two, three days, a week, slipped by, and still Victoria did not tell Gertrude. In excuse she told herself that no proper opportunity had occurred —that she could not speak before a whole gang of people; but that she *would* speak.

All the same, she allowed her name to be printed upon the newly glorified programme for two or three violin pieces. And the great event drew nearer and nearer, and the appropriate moment seemed more and more difficult to discover.

"I *will* speak," said Victoria to herself. "I *will* speak, this morning."

It was the last attempt to deceive herself into a belief in her own sincerity.

She followed her sister-in-law to her boudoir, where she found her immersed in some intricate accounts of the housekeeper's, which wouldn't come out right do what she would. The spring morning was nearly sultry, and as nobody was ever able to persuade Mrs. Edmund Leathley to open the windows properly in her boudoir, she was at the moment, between the heat and the housekeeper's figures, both tired and cross.

Victoria had chosen an unpropitious moment. But, then, why had Victoria dallied?

"Gertrude!"

Mrs. Edmund Leathley started violently at the sound of her name from Victoria's lips.

She looked up from the rows of refractory figures.

"Victoria," she exclaimed sharply, "how you do disturb one, creeping in like that! Well, what do you want *now*?"

She sighed with exaggerated resignation. Like Mrs. Squeers, it gratified her to imagine that she

was "more than a mother to them all," and she played the part accordingly.

"Well, Victoria?"

"Gertrude, look here, I—I—find I can't possibly—I mean I shall—I must go up to town."

"Up to town!" reiterated her sister-in-law. "Why what on earth do you want to go to town for? Anyhow, you can't *possibly* go up till after the concert."

"That's just it," said Victoria, with a gulp, and one last desperate effort. "I can't stay for the concert. I—I have most important business in London; and, besides, I fancy I ought to run over to Paris and see Monsieur S—— about——"

"Paris!" Mrs. Edmund Leathley nearly screamed. "Paris! Victoria, you really try one's patience. Now listen, there's a dear girl, to reason. I am sure the business can wait. Besides, it must wait, for think what a marked discourtesy—a *marked* discourtesy, Victoria, you would show Mr. Loevio, by marching out of the house just as he comes. Remember his part in your opera. Oh, you can't, positively! Remember, too, the sort of construction that will be put upon your throwing over our poor, dear people at the last moment—our dear people at Eastaston. Great celebrities should be doubly careful not to look as if they gave themselves airs. My dear, your father would be dreadfully hurt, I know, if you treated his people, or his guest discourteously."

Victoria fixed her cold, dark, weary eyes on her sister-in-law's face. Strange that the latter, looking up into those eyes, should have read no message in them. Then Victoria laughed.

"Very well, Gertrude, let us not be discourteous, by all means. I should never dream of being discourteous to a *great* singer. That is a luxury one reserves to oneself for little people."

"I don't know what you mean," said Mrs. Edmund Leathley crossly.

This was perfectly true. No shadowy remembrance even dimmed the mirror of her memory as to any circumstance in which a part she had played might give colour or meaning to the other's words.

"I wish you wouldn't talk in enigmas," she continued, "and that you wouldn't come interrupting me with nonsense. I do declare I'm worried to death—what with one thing or another—trying to please you all! And there's Trottie complaining of her throat, and Harris says she had that horrid croupy cough I dread so much last night. Dear Victoria, I wish you'd run up and take a look at her. She's not going to be bad, I hope, but she's feeling rather wretched, poor little mite! You always manage to put her in a good humour."

Victoria laid down her arms.

It was no use, she told herself, as she went upstairs to the nursery to see her little niece. She had done her part—her part.

She repeated this to herself many times, as she sat beside Trottie's cot, and made conversation for that somewhat *exigeante* little person, who was not very ill, but ill enough to be fretful and feverish, and to need, like bigger persons, to be amused.

"It's not my fault," she repeated again to herself, when she was alone once more, "and I will *keep* him away from me. He won't dare, if I show him

I won't stand it. And"—a little faint, pallid smile broke over her face—"it will be nice just to see him again."

Her eye fell upon something lying on the writing-table in her music-room. It was a programme of the forthcoming entertainment. Victoria saw only the words "Mr. Louis Loevio."

"Louis!" She murmured the syllables very softly.

She went to one of her book-cases presently, and searched through the shelves. Very soon she found the object of her search—"Shirley"—one of her few favourite novels.

Taking the book down, she laid it on the table and turned over the pages rapidly, going backwards and forwards till she came to the following passage:—

"Louis, an easy, liquid name, not soon forgotten."

She read the words more than once. "An easy liquid name," she murmured once more, with a little absent smile. "Louis!"

Her eyes—such cold little eyes—grew soft and larger as they grew lustrous. She sat quite still, a little glow of colour in her face, her mouth and her eyes smiling. She gazed at the name printed on the programme again, and at the open pages of Charlotte Brontë's incomparable story, and she trembled. But presently the reaction came. She pushed the programme and the book away from her. Her face turned pale, and her mouth set itself into hard, nearly straight, lines.

"Oh, you idiot!" she said to herself. Oh, you *weak* fool! Getting maudlin over a name!"

She opened her blotter, and drew a sheet of blank MS. music-paper in front of her.

No use! Her hands shook, and her brain reeled. Work! She could not work. The discord of her own emotions shut out the harmonies with which her brain had to do. Work! A sneer curled her lips. Work! When only one idea, only one thought, would resolve itself before her view.

She was a great composer. They said she had done wonders; they were all saying it. She had touched, or nearly touched, the heights in an Art which hitherto has jealously shut out women from its inner sanctuary; her hand had drawn aside the curtain that has been hung so high that woman's stature has not yet apparently found itself able to reach forth unto it. This one girl of eight-and-twenty years had lifted up *her* hand and dared, and achieved, and triumphed. Triumphed openly; a triumph, not for herself alone, but for her sex.

But of what use was it? Of what use? She was a woman, after all—only a woman, like other women, like the one woman of imperishable fame to whose glory her hand had added one more radiant beam. The destiny of her womanhood had come to her as it comes to the meanest, and the weakest, and the worst—as it had come to the daughter of Greece, whose story she had told once more, whose story of a woman's love—only a woman's love—has lived through the long-spent ages, the ages wherein have perished almost every fragment of the woman's great splendour of intellect and brain.

So it is, perhaps always, perhaps unchangeable, a law immovable, perhaps immutable, that in woman's history the heart shall dominate the head!

Victoria was in love.

That is the plain, unvarnished fact, divested of all hyperbole. She was in love. A commonplace ending to a far from commonplace career—merely to be in love!

And she was not in love happily. It humiliated her, this love; it ran aground against a whole array of strong, womanly prejudices. She knew its value, or she thought she did, because she also knew herself, or she thought she did also. She knew, or believed, that it was, or would be, evanescent—sooner or later. But of late it was being forced home upon her that this love, in being destroyed, might destroy more than itself alone; of late she had thought this, and many other strange thoughts too, for there is no such breeder of strange thoughts as Love.

Amor vincit omnia. Truly, Love conquers all things. Faith may remove mountains, but Love will subdue a universe. Volumes have been written about this wondrous thing which life gives to men and women. Take away Love from the literature of mankind, and wherewithal is left?

No faith, no creed, no religion, can number among its votaries the men and women of the whole world —past, present, and—shall it not be?—to come. Only Love can do that. And Love does it daily, adding daily fresh numbers to his countless ranks.

All shall drag at his chariot wheels, be they who they may—saints or heroes, gods or goddesses queens or emperors.

Why, then, should one English girl imagine she could escape—even though she be a child of the New Age, and have formulated a new doctrine of Life?

How splendid it is to be a child of the New Age—to formulate a new doctrine of Life! How splendid it is—is it not?—to live up—or down—to your New Doctrine!

The children of this generation believe that they are wiser than all who have gone before them.

The belief is one which those who have gone before have, in their turn, been not unwilling to assume also.

The children of this generation shall have, at all events, the benefit of the doubt.

But if they are wiser than their forbears, they are not wiser than Love.

Love laughs in their sapient faces; laughs long and loudly.

They are the strong—armed; but he is stronger than they are, and when he comes he conquers—always.

Victoria had flouted Love. But Love had come to her and—conquered. And now Love was having his revenge—his revenge for every humorous cynicism, every polished sneer, every intellectual gibe at his supremacy. He had come for his revenge, and all her forces went down before his raking fusillade.

She was there, weak, defenceless, foolish, the most pitiable creature imaginable—a woman in love. A woman in love, in love against her will, against her reason, against her desire, in spite of herself!

She thought of it all as she sat there. She thought till she was tired of thinking. She thought of Annesley, and his goodness, and his love. She let her mind dwell on his truth, and his constancy, and his single-mindedness, because she wanted to

be true, and to be constant, and she knew that she could not trust herself. A profound mistrust of herself grasped her. She was so weak! Even the sound of one name unnerved her; even the thought of seeing him, this man whom she despised —and loved—agitated her unspeakably.

What would it be when he was here—here beside her, with the power of his presence added to the power of his love? It was a question she did not dare ask herself. It would have been better if she had.

The tendency to evasion in a woman's mind is one of its most pronounced and inherent weaknesses, Victoria had a fine mind—acute, cultured, strenuous; the mind, not indeed of the thinker or scientist but of the artist—that is, if one will deny that the artist, the true artist—above all, the creative artist—has qualities of mind essential to thought and science. But it was a woman's mind,—a woman, too, of intensely feminine calibre ("femininity" it has been well called)—and the weakness of evasion was there.

She believed now that she could evade the power of this love which consumed her, by evading the thought of its existence.

She stood up from her writing-table, and went over to the open window. She leaned her forehead forward to the air which blew in. For the moment she was persuaded that the numbness of feeling which had succeeded her emotion was the repose of a heart and will at peace, and self-controlled.

She put up her hand, her left hand, to push back the soft lace curtains, and a flash of sunlight played on the sapphires and diamonds of the ring

which bound her to Annesley till a simpler circlet should bind her more strongly and closely still.

Her eyes caught the flash of the sunlight as it radiated like living fire in the cut brilliancy of the precious stones.

She gazed at the shimmering, glittering circlet fixedly. It represented to her a great deal. To Annesley how much more! Then, as if its iridescent loveliness dazzled, and blinded, and hurt her, she hid her hand away down at her side.

But the fascination of the ring seemed to draw it, in another moment, into view again. Perhaps reflected in the jewels was some forecast of the future, that they arrested her gaze whether she would or no.

Victoria began pulling off her ring—Annesley's ring, that which the society interviewer would presently describe in two lines all to itself as a "superb hoop of sapphires and diamonds of the purest water, and finest colour and brilliancy, very simple and charming, an ideal engagement ring." Victoria began slipping it up and down on her finger.

Presently it slipped off altogether, and slipped out of her fingers, and lay, a small, now darkened, object on the carpet.

For a long time she did not heed it.

Her eyes were watching some little clouds—white, innocent, babylike clouds—floating in the clear blue April sky. All at once a shower began coming up from the west. Angry, iron-grey clouds, elderly, storm-tossed, bitter clouds came up, too, and swept into darkness and cold rain the pretty white cloudlets sailing away so gaily a few minutes before in their deceptive heaven of blue.

Victoria felt the spatter of a cold douche of rain in her face. She turned from the window, hesitated, looked onwards into the room, then outward once more, into the sky without.

Without were darker clouds, more rain, colder, sharper, heavier rain.

She stooped and picked up her ring, turned it round, and dusted it carefully (though there was no dust on it) with her pocket handkerchief. Then she put it on firmly, and her lips closed firmly, and her eyes shone steadily once more.

That was done. It was well. She breathed more freely. Did she? Well, perhaps more quickly.

She sat down at the writing-table again, and took up her pen. This time she dotted down a bar of notes. Her left hand, with its troth-ring, lay spread out, keeping down the corner of the music-paper firmly, steadily. Steadily? Oh yes, very steadily, for the diamonds were quivering and sparkling oddly. Very steadily, though now she was not dotting down any more notes.

She was sitting very still, and her face was white and set. Heart and soul she was praying, a dumb, voiceless prayer; yet, dumb and voiceless, such a prayer as she never in her life prayed before. But the heavens were as brass, or seemed so, and her prayers returned empty into her own bosom. The effort, even to pray, was too much. Even to pray! It is not easy to pray—not by any means. Perhaps if it were, it would be robbed of its best benefits. Victoria's strong prayer died, slain by that which was stronger still.

The realisation of this forced her down upon her knees. It seemed to her that the voice of her petition

would indeed be fuller, would indeed be worthier of response, were it sent forth from the attitude in which the human creature has instinctively become conscious that it may with fitness approach the Divine Presence.

But it was no use.

Attitude won't do. Attitude, of the outward body of flesh, is nothing—nothing—unless it but reflect the inward spirit of the heart and soul.

There was a dead, blank pause.

Victoria, kneeling there, was conscious neither of sound nor motion.

But all at once, without a second of warning, the rainstorm within burst forth.

Victoria, on her knees still, flung up her head, as if she cast off all restraint. Her face flushed, her bosom heaved; she did not once look at the pure brilliant ring.

"I love him!" she whispered hotly to her own heart. "Oh, I do, I do, I do! Louis, Louis, Louis!"

Then her hands went up to her face, and down came the rain; the rain of tears—blinding, drenching rain of tears.

"Tears, idle tears!" Ah, well said!
A woman in love!
Quite commonplace.

CHAPTER XXIV.

LOEVIO came. Loevio, the splendid. Loevio, smiling, prosperous, courtly, as befitted one, and was but natural in one, who had just come from Sandringham.

Nevertheless, Loevio showed good breeding, or a reflex of the same, caught on the burnished surface of his own adaptability. Loevio had no boast to make of his own prowess. On the contrary, he seemed to strip himself of all the trappings of success, and to be once more here at Eastaston, just the Loevio which he was when he had paid his first visit three years ago. Such was his attitude—an admirable one. But the attitude of others, of those surrounding him, had slipped away—very much indeed, slipped away—from its original bearings.

That is the way of the world. It is the fate of its attitudes to slip and slide with the slippings and slidings of Time and Circumstance.

Loevio, who had fought with Time and Circumstance, had assuredly come off victor. Loevio was shrewder than Mrs. Edmund Leathley, who bowed to Time and Circumstance, and hastened to propitiate both with lavish gifts and offerings. Loevio held himself, so to speak, erect, *imperium in imperio*, an empire within an empire. Mrs. Edmund Leathley stooped, and gave herself away horribly, grotesquely, it seemed to her sister-in-law

when her sister-in-law's cold, scornful, weary eyes rested upon her, and her memory, which was admirable, recalled bygone scenes.

Mrs. Edmund Leathley had neither eyes nor ears, neither sense nor hearing, for any one but Loevio now.

Loevio the great, the splendid, had come to her rescue; he had, of his own free will, glorified the darling of her heart. Could anything be too good for him? Apparently, nothing.

Loevio accepted everything, all smiles; even Mrs. Edmund Leathley's untiring attentions. He had come to take that which he desired, and meant to have; for with Louis Loevio to desire was to have, sooner or later, and Mrs. Edmund Leathley's attentions were no more unbearable than the buzzing of a busy bluebottle fly.

Perhaps it was as well that Mrs. Edmund Leathley, by the law of nature, was kept in ignorance of Loevio's private denomination of herself. Possibly even her present attitude, so delightfully conformed to that of the world and Society, especially Society —in capital letters—and starting from Sandringham, —even this attitude might have witnessed another slipping and sliding, had its owner become aware of Loevio's innermost thoughts. Even an attitude so comprehensive as Mrs. Edmund Leathley's would hardly survive hearing its owner denominated "A damned old piece of propriety."

Hardly, indeed.

Loevio was constantly asking himself "Why that damned old piece of propriety could not give him a minute to himself?"

That is, a minute, or many minutes, to himself and Victoria.

To him, at Eastaston Manor every one, save Victoria only, was a vaporous shadow. She alone was real, concrete, absolute. On his arrival, he glowed with delight. She was so cold, so indifferent. She was putting herself far away from him so sedulously, so carefully.

Loevio was enchanted.

He read her like a book; like a child's one-syllable story-book—Victoria, who was a great artist!

Loevio spread himself with pride and love—love truly; there was no doubt about that. That was real, at all events.

"Little darling!" he said to himself, pushing up his magnificent hair to a still more effective wave of arrangement. "Little darling! trying to run away from *me*! We will change all that, Loevio, my boy. That country bumpkin in Ireland may stick in his own Irish bogs."

It pleased Mr. Loevio to think of his rival as "a country bumpkin." No doubt it was pre-eminently gratifying to the son of a——, well, of a nobody in particular, to feel that he could look upon Fitz-Gerald Annesley, an Annesley of Castle Connaught, as a country bumpkin.

"Ancestors!" grinned Loevio. "Ancestors! Damnation humbugs—whole boiling of 'em! Much good *his* ancestors 'll do him now!"

Well, possibly Annesley's ancestors would do him more good than the great Loevio could imagine.

But if a man is born stone blind he cannot be blamed if the goodness and beauty of the light are sealed to him.

Loevio arrived in high hope. But when he saw

Victoria, his height of hope increased until he became almost giddy.

Victoria was in the drawing-room to greet him when he entered it on the first evening of this his second visit to Eastaston. Victoria was there.

So much had her effort to do right amounted to!

Loevio came in just two minutes before dinner was announced; as once before he had come into that room.

But his coming now was the cynosure of all eyes, the admired of all eyes, save one pair only—a keen, faded pair. Nevertheless, even those eyes could not but admit that he bore himself gracefully through a trying ordeal—one, indeed, of the most trying of ordeals—that of flattery and admiration.

One other pair of eyes—dark eyes, in which coldness and passion strove together for the mastery—grew dim as they met his glance. His glance, travelling rapidly over the room and its inhabitants, had come to a dead halt at a small, slight figure, and a face as white as its owner's soft silk frock.

Loevio took six strides, and stood in front of Victoria. He smiled with his handsome blue eyes down into her little dark ones; and they winced—he saw them wince—under the gaze of his.

She stretched out her hand mechanically, and he held it in his for just the time which the laws of Society demanded—no more, no less.

Loevio was very well trained by this time; he had learned everything—even the latest fashion in shaking hands. He bent his head ever so slightly towards her.

"How do you do, Miss Leathley? *What* perfect

weather we are having! It is midsummer, and yet only April. But the prophets tell us we shall pay for it by-and-by."

No more. He turned before Victoria could speak, to greet with a like soft commonplace some one else to whom a greeting was necessary.

Victoria, her heart beating in her throat, shrank back again into the shade of the curtain in the dark corner, where she had ensconced herself in a wild desire to hide.

But Loevio, even after dinner, did not go near her again that evening.

He gave himself up, body and mind if not heart and soul, to Mrs. Edmund Leathley.

He never approached Victoria, never addressed her; but once or twice he looked at her—looked full into her eyes; and the look was enough, quite enough, for her and—for him.

CHAPTER XXV.

IT was over.

That is to say, the concert was over. And Victoria's violin pieces, which in truth she had played blindly, were over; and Loevio's songs, which took the world by storm, always and everywhere, were over also; and his hours at Eastaston were nearly over. And yet Loevio's opportunity had not come.

He had seen Victoria, to be sure. He had spoken to her, now and then, but always in the presence of others.

To see the woman you madly love, to speak to her in public, is better than not to see her, or to speak to her at all; but that is the best that can be said for it.

Nevertheless, Loevio's heart still beat high with hope.

As to Victoria—Victoria told herself that she thanked God that it was all so nearly over; that she thanked God she had escaped—that only a few hours now were left wherein to fear anything from his presence.

She thanked God that it was so. And yet her heart stood still as she remembered how few, how very few, those hours were after all, and that he had made no effort to be alone with her.

As she counted the hours still left, at breakfast that morning, she felt the food choke her.

Loevio, on the contrary, seemed to find no difficulty with his food.

Loevio, indeed, was quite able to satisfy an appetite which was in consonance with the girth of—his waist.

Mrs. Edmund Leathley regarded Loevio with increasing approval. His well-ordered appetite for breakfast completely won her approbation. Her clear views were very dogmatic upon the benefits to be derived from eating a hearty breakfast.

Loevio was only too happy to eat a hearty breakfast at any time, but especially happy at a time like this, when he got such a breakfast as this without paying for it. No wonder Loevio went steadily through his breakfast—steadily and conscientiously! No wonder Mrs. Edmund Leathley beamed upon him!

Loevio, smiling back at her with charming deference, wondered how many more smiles would be needed. His plan of action was by this time pretty definitely marked out. It caused him to feel a quiver of intense amusement, the thought that by-and-by he was going to lead Mrs. Edmund Leathley captive to the doing of the one deed which above all others she would have abhorred, did she know it. But then she would not know it. That was the part which was excruciatingly funny—to Loevio.

He lingered with her after breakfast. The others disappeared, and Victoria disappeared—was one of the first to disappear.

Loevio, alone with his excellent hostess, was surprised, *so* surprised, when he found how rapidly time was passing.

Mrs. Edmund Leathley, when his surprise was conveyed to her, was more flattered than ever.

Now was Loevio's opportunity.

"Time *is* flying," he said gravely. "Can you tell me if Miss Leathley is in the house? I should be glad to see her for a moment or two on a little matter of business"—if Loevio didn't laugh when he said this, the Fates must have laughed heartily as they heard it—"a little matter of business. Er—Miss Leathley was good enough to say she would give me a minute this morning, but I am afraid she must have forgotten; and our conversation was so engrossing *I* quite forgot everything. I am *very* careless!"

He smiled beautifully, and his clear, liquid blue eyes looked more frankly ingenuous than ever.

Mrs. Edmund Leathley felt annoyed with her sister-in-law—very much annoyed.

"Victoria never thinks of any one but herself," she thought at once.

She stood up and rang the bell.

"I'll find her for you," she said briskly; and she beamed on Loevio with greater favour than ever.

"Oh, thanks *so* much! It is merely a small arrangement that I fancied might be made for Miss Leathley. It might be of trifling service to her opera, especially the new one; and I do not like to lose the opportunity of talking it over with her. We are both such busy people that——"

"Of course," cried Mrs. Edmund Leathley. "*How* busy *you* must be! So good of you to think of troubling about the affair!"

"No, no, not at all."

He smiled a gentle smile of deprecation.

A servant, in response to Mrs. Edmund Leathley's summons, appeared at that moment.

"Inquire if Miss Leathley is in the house," said Mrs. Edmund Leathley to the man.

The latter retired.

Loevio turned again to his hostess.

"I believe," he said, with a faint, wistful smile, "your sister-in-law has a most enchanting retreat in the turret wing. She *did* once say I should see the music-room where 'Sappho' was written; but no doubt she has forgotten all about it."

"Did she?" said Mrs. Edmund Leathley at once. Mrs. Edmund Leathley never permitted any one—if she knew it—to tamper with promises once made. "How very like Victoria!" she said to herself. "I can't bear that sort of unconscientiousness," she added, to herself also.

Mrs. Edmund Leathley was nothing if she was not conscientious.

"He *shall* see the room if he wants to," was her conclusive thought.

The door opened.

"Miss Leathley," said the footman, "is in her music-room, if you please, m'm."

Loevio nearly grinned. As it was, he was obliged to turn away his head for a moment. Because he had heard—what his hostess had not heard—he had heard, or rather, he had overheard, Victoria say that she was going to her music-room for the morning.

Mrs. Edmund Leathley rose from her chair promptly.

"*Now*, Mr. Loevio you shall see Victoria's *den*, and have your chat with Victoria at once."

She beamed on him with added favour.

"I really must speak to Victoria," she continued severely. "She is *so* careless of how she trespasses on other people's kindness. She *should* not have forgotten your kind interest, and walked off without asking *your* wishes. She should have remembered how limited your time is, and how good it is of you to trouble about her affairs. I shall speak to her."

Loevio stretched out his hands.

"Oh, pray don't let her think that *I* was annoyed! May I entreat you *not* to say anything of this to her? I should *hate* her even to think that she had done anything to annoy me. It would be too bad to make her feel bored in any way. There is nothing for which I feel so appalling an objection, which is so horrible, as the idea of being a bore. As a favour, to me, perhaps you will not mention this—er—this conversation."

"You are too kind, too considerate, Mr. Loevio."

Mrs. Edmund Leathley smiled with overwhelming graciousness, as she said it.

"Infernal old cackler!" said Mr. Loevio, privately, as he followed her with alacrity up the turret stairs.

"I shall not scold Victoria *this* time," she added, quite confidentially, as they reached the top of the stairs, "for your sake. And I suppose we must forgive her a good deal just at present. An engagement is a trying—what? Oh, yes, yes, the wedding will be in July. Ah, *here* she is, hidden away as usual."

Here was Victoria, surely staring blankly, dumbly, at both her visitors—at Loevio, who was smiling beautifully.

Loevio had done a daring thing, a very daring thing, in thus tracking Victoria; but Loevio did

many daring things. Loevio would have dared even the devil, he said himself—but a good deal at all events; which was perhaps one factor in the success of his undertakings.

Loevio now was daring. But Loevio was strong, and Victoria was weak, and the Fates were befriending Loevio—those terrible Fates, that always run to the winning side.

Loevio began with Art. He talked Art admirably for fully ten minutes. No one else was able to get in a word. Not Victoria, who was powerless and speechless, nor Mrs. Edmund Leathley, who was soon bored.

That was precisely what Loevio had in view. He hoped Mrs. Edmund Leathley would be bored, for then she would go.

Go he was determined she should, but—one can't very well turn one's hostess out of a room in her own house.

Loevio was very patient, but he flung Art at Mrs. Edmund Leathley—Art, in the abstract, and without, as hitherto, any connection of the same with the concrete talents and virtues of Mrs. Edmund Leathley herself; and the result justified Loevio's calculations.

In ten minutes, Mrs. Edmund Leathley found that she was bored. In eleven minutes, she recollected that she wished to interview the cook on the subject of a new curry. Half a minute later, she remembered that she had not given Harris the bottle with Trottie's new tonic; and before the other half-minute had run its course, she was out of the door, on her way downstairs, commending Mr. Loevio before she went to her pale sister-in-law's care.

"Dear me," she thought, as she went, "how un-

sociable and how selfish Victoria is! She looked positively bored—almost cross—at our interrupting her. Upon my word, I *think* she might make herself agreeable to her father's guest. I can't look after *every one*. She might, at least, help a little. But she's dreadfully spoilt."

Mrs. Edmund Leathley pattered down the turret stairs to the excellent accompaniment of her own admirable reflections. The gaiety of a conscience void of offence inspirited her.

"I never could understand Victoria," she added conclusively, as she reached the lowest step. She did not add, perhaps, because the fact was one which needed no recalling, that she did not like people whom she could not understand.

Loevio went on talking, and listening—listening attentively to the patter of those irreproachable matronly feet, until the baize door leading into the corridor slammed.

Then, and not till then, did Loevio stop talking.

But then he did stop, and he crossed the room without a word, and calmly shut the door close.

"There is quite a draught," he said suavely, to Victoria, who stood between her writing-table and one of the windows, motionless.

Loevio went very close to her.

"You mustn't give yourself a horrid cold," he continued softly.

Victoria's heart beat to suffocation. She looked at him imploringly, with dark, cold eyes, and scarlet cheeks—cheeks from which a moment later every vestige of the hot colour faded.

He smiled into her eyes. He was sure of the future now.

Still Victoria stood motionless, silent.

Loevio, drawing nearer, feasted his eyes to the full upon her, there beside him. His eyes noted every detail. He saw the dark cloudiness of her hair, the outline of one pallid cheek, the corners of the firm, proud lips, the side of the round, white throat with one small ear above it, between the dark depth of her hair and the soft band of her fresh, spring dress. He trembled. Every fibre of his artistic temperament thrilled responsively to the aspect of this quaint, beautiful room, and the close presence of its owner.

Nevertheless, though he trembled, his voice, when he spoke, was quite steady.

"How *very* tired you look!"

She started and turned pale—paler, if that were possible, than before. The emphasis of the words, the low tenderness of his intonation, were unmistakable. She moved away from him quickly.

Loevio drew back with an inimitable gesture of wounded feeling.

"Forgive me!" he said quickly. "I have no right to remark upon your looks, but—it—it *hurts* me to see you look as if you—you were suffering."

A swift tremor of emotion quivered across her lips.

Loevio saw it; he made a step forward. But Victoria drew herself up. She met his pleading gaze with a cold droop of her eyelids. She tried to smile, coldly, indifferently.

"Oh, thanks," she said stiffly. "My looks are deceptive, I'm afraid. I don't think I feel particularly tired just at present."

He looked at her once more—a full, intent look—for the space of a second. Her eyes fell before it

He came close to her again, with a sudden and, it would seem, irresistible impulse. The words which, as it seemed also, burst from his lips, could not apparently be stayed.

"Oh, my child, my dearest! why, *why* do you try to deceive me? Wait, hear me! Do you know why I came down here? Because your face has *haunted* me. My own happiness was nothing—nothing, but *yours*!"

"Mr. Loevio, please move. Allow me to leave the room."

The studied coldness of the words was perfect. But her face was not so perfectly controlled.

Loevio watched the latter.

He stood aside at once out of her path.

"Go," he exclaimed huskily, "by all means; but" — his voice broke suddenly — "God forgive you!"

She hesitated. He saw it, though his eyes were averted; he felt it; he knew that she hesitated. He waited. He was not a great actor, he was not a student of human passion, for nothing. He waited.

She did not go. She turned to him instead, and her lips quivered.

"I beg your pardon!" she said tremulously. "I —I had no right to speak like that; but——"

He shook his head.

"Victoria,"—it was the first time he had ever uttered her Christian name in her hearing,—"why are you doing this thing?"

His voice was harsh, even in its delicious musical *timbre*. He walked up and down the room in unconcealed agitation.

"If I could only get you to realise it!" he continued imploringly. "If you could only *know* or understand what it is that you intend to do! Think what it will be to bind yourself by the hardest of all rivets, for your life, for days, and weeks, and years! Think, think, for a moment! Why are you doing it? For God's sake, why should you do such an evil thing?—for it *is* evil!"

She shivered. He saw that she shivered. He paused for one brief second of time. His voice, when he spoke again, was less harsh; it grew pleading, persuasive, once more.

"Don't, don't persist. It is to do yourself the cruellest injury that man or woman can inflict upon themselves. Think of your life, your happiness, your peace of mind!"

She raised her eyes to his face. A smile, which had a touch of irony in it, curled round her lips.

"You are very kind," she said, interrupting him; "but I am, I assure you, quite old enough to take care of my own interests."

The words were very nearly insolent. They implied so unmistakably the speaker's construction of his motives.

Loevio flung out his hands despairingly.

"*You*—are very generous."

His voice, as he said it, sank lower, almost to a whisper.

Victoria's face changed. At once he saw the softening of its delicate outlines. He raised his head again. He drew himself to his full height as he stood before her.

"But it is true," he said impulsively, with a warm, passionate ring in his voice; "it is true. I *do* care.

It is everything to me. Why should I not say it? I am not ashamed to own it. I do care. Ah, you know it. You know that I have cared for—for *years*, and yet you do this! You want to ruin my life, and—your own. Oh, you *can't* deny it—you can't, for you're a truthful, sincere woman; you want to ruin our lives, both our lives, just for a pitiful prejudice of pride! Victoria"—his voice which was so musical, so flexible, so perfectly trained to every shade of effective intonation, changed again—"Victoria, say it to me once, even if you never speak to me again; say, at all events, that you do care for me—a little bit."

She turned away and put out her hand to keep him back. He made no attempt to move towards her. Standing where he was, he laughed—a slight, bitter, ironical laugh.

"It is a good thing," he said, with cool, biting sarcasm, "to be a woman of the world. My God, what a good thing it must be to be a woman of the world, with one's heart in excellent control!"

Victoria's face flushed scarlet. She sank down helplessly on the window seat. Her lips quivered.

"You are wrong," she whispered, "quite wrong; and it is mean and contemptible of any man to come and—and persecute a woman as you are—persecuting me. I—I——"

Loevio stamped his foot coolly.

"Pshaw!" he exclaimed brusquely, with a sudden and consummately effective change of manner. "What is the use of the old stale platitudes and commonplaces? We are not children, you and I. We are not boy and girl. We each know the other's feelings. And if you do this, you do it without a

shadow of excuse—not the shadow of a shade. You sacrifice me; you sacrifice—Mr. Annesley—for the sake of a prejudice. I *know* it, I know it—a prejudice!"

His roughness, his vehemence, the relentless logic of his assertions, joined to the tell-tale witness of her own heart, overcame her. She had nothing to answer, nothing to put forward. Besides—she loved him, and her heart was helpless in his hands.

"Well, I shall soon be gone. I sha'n't trouble you any more; be assured of that. I only came because—your happiness—is the dearest object of my life, and because—I love you. I shall never say it again. Let me say it now. Victoria, my love! my darling!"

But while he said it he did not move one inch nearer to her; not one inch. He held out his hand towards her where she sat in the window seat.

"Won't you say good-bye," he said softly, with a perfect little gesture of penitence and deference; "and forgive me? Let us part—friends, at all events."

But Victoria broke down utterly. She burst into a storm of hysterical weeping.

Loevio was struck with consternation, or seemed so, anyhow.

With a quick impulse he knelt down beside her; but still he did not touch her.

"Oh, don't!" he cried tenderly. "Don't give way like this! I am *so* sorry! I had no right to be so cruel to you."

He paused; but she could not speak. Her sobs were deep and broken. He felt her whole frame

being shaken by them. He laid his hand very timidly on the seat beside her. It just touched the edge of her dress.

"I am so sorry!" he said again gently.

She raised her face as he spoke; it was stained with scarlet, and drawn with pain, and the tears hung on her eyelashes.

"What am I to do? Oh, what am I to do? It is breaking my heart, the whole thing!"

Loevio's eyes almost flashed. His heart leaped into his throat, but he controlled himself admirably. His accents were commendably firm and reproving.

"What are you to do, my dear, dear love? Will you try to be reasonable?—to look at the matter from a right standpoint? You are naturally thinking more of—another person—than of yourself or—me. Well, *I* believe you will do that other person an infinitely smaller injury by refusing to marry him, when you do not care for him, than in fulfilling an engagement which you *know* you shrink from. I know it is not a nice thing for one man to plead against another, but the right is on *my* side—it is, believe me. And I have waited, and worked, and hoped, only to be rewarded by knowing that you—care for me, and marry another man. I ask you, in all reason, in all justice, are you acting fairly?"

A little, shuddering sigh of indecision broke from her lips. She raised her hand, her left hand, and pushed back the soft hair from her forehead, as if even its slight pressure hurt her. Loevio, as she did so, saw the brilliancy of Annesley's ring on her finger.

He gathered her right hand into his own. His fingers closed firmly round the soft palm. He gazed at her beseechingly.

"Victoria!" That was all he said—just the one word.

But there are many ways of saying even one word.

"I am wrong, and you know it. I am a low, contemptible fool. I belong truly—to—Jerry."

Loevio clenched his teeth furiously, but no word escaped his lips.

"I—*promised*—Jerry. How could I—how can I—insult him?"

Loevio's hand held hers in its strong clasp. He was drawing close to her—so close now, that his silky, auburn hair touched her face, which was twisted and distorted with crying. The touch of it against her cheek made her heart throb in double time.

"Victoria!" said Loevio again, very softly. "Victoria!" There was no need for him to say more.

Victoria was a woman—in love.

CHAPTER XXVI.

So Loevio got what he wanted, or nearly so. Because, although some time had gone by, Victoria still halted between two courses of action—still shivered, temporised, procrastinated. She had sworn to Loevio that she would set herself free, and yet she had not done so.

Annesley, detained during these days in Ireland, was still her affianced husband. His ring was on her finger. His claims were publicly acknowledged. Even the date of her marriage with him was fixed and unaltered.

This could not go on; assuredly it could not go on.

The thought of it all was bad enough when she was down at Eastaston, and separated from Loevio, but when Victoria found herself in London the present state of things became nearly torture. For in London Loevio was close to her—Loevio, now a passionate lover, who would not, could not, be denied. Here day by day was Loevio, urging, entreating, imploring her to fulfil the promise he had won from her.

Again and again Victoria reiterated her promise to him.

She determined that she would write to Annesley. She would write a full, pitiful, beseeching letter; a letter explaining everything, confessing everything;

one which would beg for pardon, and one which —if she knew Annesley—would obtain for her her release.

Every day Victoria told herself she would write that letter. Yet it remained unwritten.

It remained unwritten until the day came when, if it were to be written at all, it could be delayed no longer. For, she got a letter from Annesley telling her that at last all the tiresome business which his approaching marriage had brought upon him, was nearly at an end, and she would see him in a few days. In a week he was coming to London.

A week! And she had left him even up to this in a fool's paradise!

Victoria must write that letter now, if ever. She did write a letter, which she tore up the next minute, saying it was a miserable, abominable thing, and she would try again. She tried again—and again, with but one result; waste of time, ink, and paper.

"I *cannot* write," she said to herself despairingly. "I cannot!"

The days of the week went by. Five, six, seven. Only one more day, and Annesley would arrive. Victoria had not written. Indeed, she had given up all thought of writing. She *could* not write.

It would be easier, she told herself, to speak to Jerry—dear, kind Jerry, who was always so good to her.

So the day came at last, and Annesley came, and the time and the opportunity came, as they always come, sooner or later.

Annesley arrived, full of hope, full of confidence

full of joy. He came in very radiant, very smiling, and very carefully dressed. He never forgot Victoria's fastidiousness in minor matters. He was shrewd enough to know that with a woman such little things yet go a long way.

Victoria thought she had never seen him look to such advantage. Happiness, after all, is the best beautifier. In the full flush of his happiness Annesley looked nearly handsome. Victoria, even in her miserable agitation, perceived it. In a moment, too, she noticed with pleasure the set of his frock coat, and the tasteful arrangement of his button-hole. Another moment and the thought flashed across her mind that Loevio, who wore precisely the same sort of frock-coat and quite as tasteful a buttonhole, did not, nevertheless, succeed in looking—as Annesley looked—quite a gentleman.

It hurt her sharply, this thought—so sharply that the pain perhaps nerved her, perhaps goaded her, to the task that lay before her.

"Victoria!" exclaimed Annesley, as he caught sight of her standing beside the drawing-room mantelpiece in Rutland Gardens, waiting for him. "My darling, at last I have got free. Did you think I was *never* coming?"

He had come over close to her as he spoke, and was trying to take her hand.

Victoria turned away from him deliberately. Deliberately she ignored his outstretched hand. Her lips set themselves hardly.

"Wait a minute, Jerry. I want to speak to you."

He retreated, feeling a little chilled, naturally,

at such a reception. But the feeling was only momentary. He remembered at once that Victoria rebelled more or less at all times against over-much demonstration in their relationship with each other. Nevertheless, it was so long since he had seen her! And he was a man, and he was in love. Flesh and blood, especially if they be in love, are reckless of restraint sometimes.

Before she could speak he had drawn her into his arms. In a second he would have kissed her. But Victoria, with a strength that was insolent in its rudeness, shook him off promptly.

"I asked you," she said coldly, "to leave me alone for a minute; you know I *hate* that sort of kissing."

This was pretty well from the woman who allowed Loevio to make love to her!

Annesley, dumb from amazement, stood silent on the spot where she had rudely pushed him. He stared helplessly at her, while he tried at the same time to collect his scattered wits. His gaze drove her wild.

"Oh, don't!" she cried sharply, and the note of pain in her voice struck on his ear harshly—"don't *don't*—worry—me! I—I——"

Annesley looked more and more bewildered.

One thing only was clear to him—that it was Victoria who was speaking. Everything must be forgiven, and permitted, to Victoria.

"Dearest," he said gently, "I sha'n't worry you. You are worrying yourself. Tell me what it's all about."

"Oh, Jerry, Jerry, dear Jerry!" cried the girl miserably, "I am so wretched! Oh, *don't*, don't come near me. I don't want you; I don't want any one;

I only want to be let alone. I wish I could go away, and never see any of your faces again!"

"What the deuce is it all about?" said the man helplessly.

Victoria looked up in his face. Her own face grew scarlet. She waited, just to nerve herself for the one supreme effort.

She never afterwards forgot that moment. The room, even a particular Capo-di-Monte bowl on the mantelpiece which had got awry, and out of its place, and which was standing crookedly, always remained hereafter mixed up with the remembrance of this scene, and with Jerry's honest, kind face with its expression of blank amazement. The amazement in his face awoke in her an hysterical and senseless inclination to laugh—or was it to cry? Possibly.

"What's it all about?" repeated Annesley once more. "Tell me," he added coaxingly. "Tell me, Victoria."

Victoria panted and turned pale.

"Jerry, don't you think—I think—in fact, I am—quite sure it is—awfully wrong.—Oh, it is a downright sin—for a woman to—marry one—man—when she—she cares really about another. Isn't it a downright sin, Jerry?"

There was no reply. Annesley's face changed suddenly, ominously.

Victoria, desperate now, perhaps driven desperate by what she saw in his face, rushed on impetuously.

"*I* think it's a downright sin, and I think it's a downright sin of any one to force a woman into marrying a man—whom—she does not love." She walked up and down the hearthrug, and beat her

feet rapidly. "I *do*, and I think a—man who would force a girl to keep to a promise—after she told him—that she" (more scarlet blushes)—"cared for —for another man, is a cruel, mean——"

Annesley stood in front of her.

"Victoria,"—his voice sounded nearly shrill, it was so strained and harsh—"what in God's name do you mean. *What do* you *mean*, Victoria? Answer me!"

Her eyes flashed.

"I mean——"

She began boldly, but she could not finish it. She faltered and grew shamefaced under the look in his eyes.

"Ah, Jerry, dear Jerry, don't be angry! don't look at me like that! Oh, it is not my fault. I—*wanted* to care for you, I did really, and I tried; but it was no use—no use. *He* came, and I—I—oh, Jerry, don't press me, it's very hard for a woman to have to speak like this; but you won't mind, Jerry, will you, giving —it—up, I mean your—our—engagement?"

She stopped. The words did indeed nearly choke her. She did not dare look at Annesley. She felt, if she could not see, what his face was like. Her own face was pitiable with the drawn, shamed eagerness in it lying on its very surface.

There was a dead silence. Suddenly a cuckoo-clock somewhere in the house chimed out the hour in quick, tuneful notes.

Annesley's voice began speaking again. It sounded to Victoria as if it were miles away—away in a dim, distant fog; yet she heard the syllables clearly enough. He stood quite still. He made no attempt to move nearer to her. She was leaning against the mantel-

piece. He was standing outwards, on the carpet, beyond the rug.

"There is not the slightest use," he said, "in pretending that I don't understand what you are saying. You want me, Victoria, to—to—give you up. I suppose that's what it all amounts to. To—give you up—to—another man. *Curse* him, whoever he is!"

That was the only savage word Annesley said in the whole affair. Surely it was pardonable!

"Yes, curse him, whoever he is!"

He paused, and smiled, a poor, wan smile, and came a little nearer to where she stood with her head bent down and her white quivering mouth. "Poor Victoria! No, don't shrink, dear. I'm not a brute or a slave-driver. I'm not going to—to force you to marry me against your will. God forbid! It doesn't matter, I suppose, *much*. Well—I hope—to God—the other fellow, whoever he is—is worth it—*all*. Oh, it doesn't matter a bit, only—have you explained to—to them all, eh, what?"

She shook her head as it lay almost on the mantelpiece.

"Oh, Jerry, they—will be—furious! Oh, Jerry! they will be so furious at my—j—j—jilting you!"

"Well," said Annesley, with a grim, pale ghost of a laugh, "I don't see what's to be done, unless *I*—jilt *you*."

Then, as she looked at him with dark, piteous eyes, he felt a mist before his own.

"Look here," he said warmly, taking her hand as he spoke—her left hand, with his shining, glittering ring still upon the third finger—into his kind, friendly grasp—"hang me if I'll let you bear it

all! Whatever you say, Victoria, I'll—I'll back it up; I will, truly. We can say, can't we"—and he laughed another sad ghost of a laugh—"that we have found out we don't quite hit it off, you know or some such rot. Any rot will do, eh, Victoria? Oh, I say, don't cry anyhow, darl ——"

"I am a beast," she sobbed brokenly. "Oh, Jerry, I am so sorry. Jerry, I *will* keep my promise to you. I will, I will!"

He smiled a little bitterly.

"I wonder, Victoria, whether you *do* love any one—any man, I mean! No, my dear; it's best for you to have the fellow you care for. You're not the sort of person, nor am I, to try any dodges like that."

His voice broke suddenly, and there was a pause.

"I suppose," he said hoarsely a moment or two later, breaking the pause, "I—I had better go."

She raised her head as he spoke. Her face was deadly pale, indeed, and wrung with agitation, but her eyes were dry. She took the sapphire-and-diamond ring off her finger, and held it out to him.

"Here—Jerry—I"—her voice stumbled shamedly—"I will send the other—things—to-morrow."

He never made a movement to take the ring. Victoria laid it hurriedly, as if it burnt her fingers, in the hand which he had held out to say good-bye. It slid from Annesley's open, flaccid palm down noiselessly on to the soft rug.

Rings, jewels, love-tokens, what were they now? What mattered it where they went?

The ring lay on the rug. Neither Victoria nor Annesley remembered it. They remembered

nothing, indeed, but he the pain, and she the shame, of their parting.

The ring lay in the soft rug till the housemaid picked it up the next morning, and carried it to the housekeeper.

Annesley stumbled home—home to an hotel sitting-room, through the streets of London; through the park, gay and fresh, and radiant in the early summer sunshine; through the noise and din; through the dull commonplace of existence. That was what it would be always now—the dull, dull, dull commonplace of existence. Yet why should he complain? He was no worse off—in many respects far better off—than millions of his fellow-creatures. Did he complain? No; he thought he did not. But—that it should be—Loevio!

Loevio! When she told him, he was stricken dumb. Loevio! "If it had been any one else," he kept saying to himself all along the streets, that glorious summer morning, "any one of *ourselves*, I could have borne it better. But a common cad, a damned, grimacing cad like *that*—and Victoria! Good God, to think of it!"

He got home—home to the hotel sitting-room—somehow.

Many persons find a hotel all the home they need.

Besides, had not Annesley five clubs at his disposal? Five clubs, each in their several ways delectable places of abode and relaxation. One or two something even better—guarded precincts, only to be entered by the select and favoured few.

What man can want a home who has five clubs of the choicest pick at his beck and call?

What a world of compensations is ours, after all!

Annesley went into his hotel sitting-room, and sat down at the round table in the centre of the room—that piece of furniture which is the *pièce-de-résistance* of hotel sitting-rooms.

Annesley sat down, dully, stupidly. He felt cold, though the sun was shining hotly—cold, at his heart. His head, heavy and weary, sank down on his folded arms. It sank down till it rested on the table beneath. His shoulders and his loins trembled. Presently his whole frame was shaken from head to foot with the force of the tearless sobs—the sobs of a strong man—that were wrung from his innermost heart.

For it was all over. He had been lifted up to heaven, and was cast down again to earth—dull, barren earth.

It was all over.

But the five clubs remained

CHAPTER XXVII.

WELL, well, well," said Mr. Leathley, and he said it a little testily, which was scarcely to be wondered at. "Oh there, my dear, there, don't cry any more! Angry! Am I angry? eh, what? Oh no, I am not angry, Victoria, but I'm confoundedly disappointed, that's all. But, well,"—he passed his hand a little impatiently over his hair—"I suppose it can't be helped! There, my dear little girl, dry your eyes. I suppose these—these things never *can* be helped."

"I wish," said Victoria wildly, "I wish I had never learned music, never had anything to do with it! Oh why, *why* did you let me do it?"

She was crying bitterly, into her lap; otherwise it is to be hoped she would have paused before saying such words, had she seen her father's face.

"My child, it is scarcely fair to blame *me*!" His voice was husky and his face was drawn. "God knows, no man ever cared more for—for his children's happiness than I do!"

"Oh, I know," cried his daughter impatiently. 'Oh, don't mind what I say. Only I hate to hurt you all so dreadfully. But, after all, it's not my *fault*, is it father, dearest? Now is it?"

Mr. Leathley patted the dark head indulgently.

"Well, no, little woman, I suppose it is *not*.

There now, try to get calm. Why this—this other fellow, number two, you know, hey?—will be here directly!"

Victoria shook her head vehemently.

"No, no, I told him not to come *near* me till I —till——"

"To-morrow," said her father; and his eyes—he couldn't help it, though he was distracted and worried—his eyes twinkled unmistakably. "To-morrow, little woman, eh? However, you must dry your eyes, and make the best of it. It's a bad bargain, but then bad bargains must be made the best of. God bless my soul, I've spent my life trying to make the best of several bad bargains, yourself included."

He smiled; he had learned to smile at so much.

"There, now"—he bent down and kissed her fondly—at least, he scrubbed his cheek lovingly against hers; that was as much as her position would let him manage—"that's agreed; we're all agreed all agreed—to differ. It's the only true philosophy of life."

He raised himself up erectly, and looked at Victoria once more. Then he went down to his study. When he got there he sat down and opened —a Blue-Book. There was profound stillness for some time in the little, stuffy room. Deep repose is to be found—in a Blue-Book.

But suddenly the door of the little, stuffy room burst open. Mr. Leathley looked up. The Blue-Book fell down — fell face downwards on the floor.

Mr. Leathley's eldest son stood before his father. The eyes of his eldest son sparkled angrily. They fixed themselves on his father, and his father

moved uneasily in his chair. He sighed. But he waited—in silence. Waiting was characteristic of this lazy, good-humoured politican, who might have been a statesman if he had only taken the trouble. He had not now long to wait. His eldest son was quite ready for him. More than quite ready; furious to begin. He began forthwith.

"I say, sir, what the devil's all this confounded humbug I hear about Victoria?"

There was no reply.

Edmund Leathley brought his hand down heavily on the leather-topped secretary table.

The odds-and-ends, which included Blue-Books. and note-books, and open letters, and scattered draughts, or portions of draughts, of parliamentary Bills, and an Act of Parliament or two, and a new French novel jigged in under one Act, Cap. 26, 5th William IV.—all the paraphernalia, in fact, of a legislator's writing-table—shook and rattled under the shock of Edmund Leathley's square fist; and the French novel escaped altogether from beneath the awful majesty of the British constitution, and lay naked, and it is hoped not ashamed, in the full light of day.

"Well, upon my soul, you're a precious lot of—of—to do a chap such a blackguard turn. I wonder *you* can sit there."

"*Edmund*," said his father.

The son's eyes fell; the son's face had the grace to look ashamed.

"I—I——" he stammered.

He was a fine young Englishman. Englishmen are not facile, not graceful in apology, even with their own fathers.

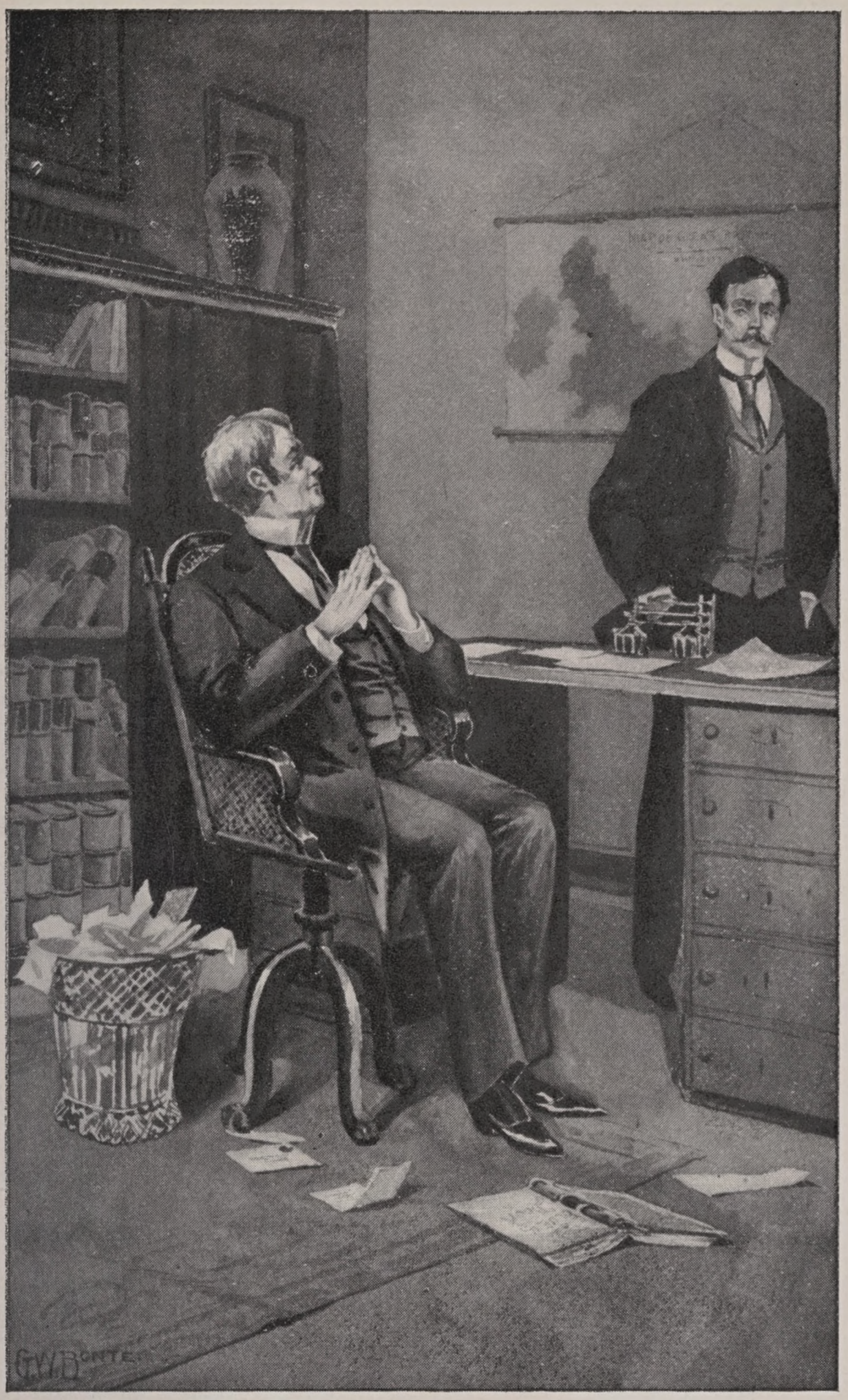
"Look here, sir, you don't think of *me*." The Englishman, embarked once more on his *own* share of things, grew fluent easily. "Jerry is *my* friend. Look at the pals we've been these years and years. *I* brought him to the house, *I* introduced him to my family, *I* and my people are supposed to—to show him, at least, common—common—decency. Then *my* sister first chooses to accept his proposals —a jolly sight too good for her they were, too, a jolly sight!"

Mr. Leathley's lips compressed themselves tightly.

"Take care," he said quietly. "Remember she *is* your sister."

"Oh, I don't know, it's a confounded shame, that's what it is—a confounded shame. The best fellow in the whole world, bar none!" There was a quiver of real feeling in the voice, that gave Mr. Leathley more patience with him. "The best fellow! As straight as a die, and to be treated like this! Made a laughing-stock to the world by a—a—a—an *imp* of a girl! Victoria always was an imp, since she could speak, and before it. It's a shame—a burning, thundering shame." He began stamping like an angry horse in a narrow stall.

"None of us ever did such a thing in our lives. Look at me. Here am I; I made up my mind to marry Gertrude, and I married her, and she married me. That's what I call being on the square. The Leathleys always have been on the square. No one could ever say, till now, that a Leathley wasn't *straight*. I don't suppose we're much better than other people—I, for my part, don't set myself up to be better than my fellows—but, thank God, I think I can act straight by most men.



"Remember she is your sister."—*Page 286*

All the Leathleys are straight, except your precious Victoria."

Mr. Leathley stood up; he bit his lip, and a flash of anger showed itself in his usually clear eyes.

"Be quiet!" he said sharply; and his son *was* quiet, from surprise. "You, sir, are not your sister's ke per."

Edmund Leathley laughed sneeringly.

"You've always spoilt her," he said furiously; "always. Victoria has had this, and that, and the other thing, just what she liked, from the day she was born. If she cried for the moon you'd tell her she should get it. It's perfectly absurd. And a pretty way she's repaid you! Oh, she may be a great swell, and compose all the—the music in the world. That won't excuse her in *my* eyes. I never could see why every one made such a fuss about Victoria—I never could see it. Gertrude never could see it either. Gertrude says—and I quite agree with her—Gertrude says——"

Mr. Leathley turned, at bay.

"Ah, for God's sake," he cried sharply, "don't bother me with what Gertrude says. Go and hear it all from her yourself, and say all you have to say to *her*. Victoria is my child, and so are you. If I have done wrongly by any of you, God forgive me, that's all. *You*, sir, are not my judge. *You*, sir, are not the person to put me on my trial. Go! Go away!"

"I don't mean to do anything of the kind,' muttered his son sulkily; "but I only say that Victoria has always been spoilt, outrageously spoilt. However, *I* don't care" (but he did care). "I don't

care. *I* wash my hands of her now; I can tell her that. I suppose"—with a glance at his father's small, silent figure—"I may take myself off. *I'm* not wanted. None of us are wanted so long as Victoria is in possession."

Mr. Leathley raised his eyes.

"My boy," he said gently, generously, "I am more grieved than I can say. But, much as I feel for Jerry, it would be worse for him by far to marry a wife who was not sure of her affection for him, or of her own feelings."

"Feelings!" interrupted his son angrily. "Feelings be hanged! A woman of eight-and-twenty ought to have known her own feelings long ago. What about poor old Jerry's feelings?—made a fool of, a laughing-stock of! Oh, I'm off. I suppose"—with a short laugh—"there's no more to be said.'

His father heaved a sigh of relief. "I conclude you mean to give her her own way. Perhaps you will allow me to ask if you have made any inquiries, or intend to make any inquiries, about this *estimable gentleman* whom Victoria prefers to Jerry Annesley?

"My dear Edmund," replied his father, "I shall take care of Victoria, I assure you, to the best of my power."

His son laughed again.

"Oh, Victoria 'll have her own way—trust her for that! Well, whatever happens, *I* sha'n't pity her. If she chooses to marry a damned cad like that, and if he beats her black and blue one of these days, *I* sha'n't pity her. Serve her jolly well right, say I—jolly well right!"

He flung himself out of the room then, and banged the door behind him so that the walls shook.

Mr. Leathley, left alone, sighed once more. He pressed his hand to his brow as if it ached. He looked tired and old, and he looked lonely too; he felt lonely, in truth; but that he was accustomed to—much more accustomed, indeed, than his children would have supposed. As he thought of Edmund's words, he sighed again.

Edmund's words were true. He knew it. He had spoilt Victoria, if by spoiling her it was meant that her happiness was all-paramount in his eyes. He was a just man, and he was just even with himself. It was true. He could never deny Victoria anything. No doubt it had been wrong and foolish of him. But he never could deny her anything.

Only he himself knew why this was so—only he, and one other, who also loved Victoria better than anything else on earth. She, Dindaor Payne, knew why this was so.

She knew, as he did, that Victoria was, strangely enough, almost the living image, if an image not nearly so beautiful, of the woman whom George Leathley had loved in the early flush of his manhood—the cousin who loved him, and who had drooped and died, the doctors said, of decline; her sister Dora *knew*, of grief and disappointment when George Leathley brought the wife whom his mother had chosen for him home to Eastaston.

That was all. But the cousin lying in her grave had never been supplanted in George Leathley's heart.

Death had given her that gift, such as it was. Death, in truth, does this far oftener than life.

It is easier by far to slay love with life than to slay it with death. By far—by far! Whom the gods love die young. Ah, yes, before the

burden and heat of life's long day has worn out love, and tarnished, and soiled, and slain it.

Mr. Leathley sighed again once or twice, heavily. Then he glanced at the clock, took out his watch, and compared both.

He must go down to the House ; in fact, he should have been there now—before now. He found he had no further time to lose. But when he got down to the House, he found that too much time had been lost already. He met a colleague in the lobby—the lobby was very excited just then. His colleague was excited also, and angry ; very angry with Mr. Leathley, when he caught sight of him. There had just been a division, a most important division ; indeed, there were any number of important divisions going on in those hot, glorious summer days, in that session which few Members will ever forget. "Yes, a division!" shouted Mr. Leathley's angry colleague hurriedly ; and he, Leathley, was late—the colleague very nearly added, "of course." The poor colleague was just then past even good manners. Indeed, good manners and—Ireland don't, somehow, seem to lie down, like the kid and the bear, together, in the House of Commons.

Mr. Leathley passed his hands once more over his tired eyes ; altogether, it had not been a pleasant day. He had been grieved, annoyed, disappointed. He had been rudely upbraided by his eldest son, and bitterly reproached by his favourite daughter. Barely veiled contempt, and quite unveiled anger, had welcomed his approach to his duties in the government of England—no, Ireland. It was hard on a man of his age, who only wanted to live at peace with all men—and women.

Mr. Leathley shook his head despairingly.

"God bless my soul!" he said to himself, with a certain bewilderment, "it's a very angry world to-day."

A very angry world indeed. Even Ada Keppel, whose temper, according to her husband's account, was fast dye, warranted not to come off in the wear —even Ada Keppel looked something like an angry woman as she faced her husband.

"It is *too* disgusting! It is horrible, odious, revolting. *Conway*, *can't* you speak?"

"Well, I can," returned that gentleman imperturbably. "Certainly I can; and I will, if you think it is worth while."

Mrs. Conway Keppel's fair, crinkly head tossed itself up impatiently.

"Oh"—she actually stamped her foot—"I should like to *shake* her! Oh, I should! A woman of her age, too! And she always talked so beautifully and so sensibly! You can't think how sensibly, Conway. Oh, you needn't laugh! It's very teasing and horrid of you to laugh. But she always did, about, about —those sort of things. And now! Oh, Conway, *how can* she be such a goose! One would think she'd have a little common-sense, ordinary *common-sense*!"

Mr. Keppel looked at his wife with a bland smile.

"My darling child," he said suavely, "*that's* where you make the mistake. Ordinary common-sense cannot take up its abode in the dwelling-places of the Arts. Victoria is a great artist. We are all immensely proud of Victoria, or we ought to be; but at the same time, we cannot add one cubit to her stature. I mean, we cannot either give her, or expect from her, what she has not. She has genius

—more than a touch of genius. She could not, in the very nature of things, have ordinary common-sense. Put it out of your head, once for all, that any such thing is to be expected of her. Will you, can you tell me of any great musician or artist who ever *had* common-sense? You won't, for you can't. It's a great pity, you say? My dear, we needn't go into *that*. The fact is enough. In this world one can't have everything. In fact, you can't have one single supremely good thing unless you pay for it. That is the one immutable law of being—payment for value received. A great artistic gift is, no doubt, a glorious thing; only it must be paid for. Its owner must pay for it, and those who enjoy its fruits must pay for them. Well, here it comes. We have Victoria. She has her great gift for music; but neither of us can get common-sense from the same source. Oh no. Common-sense is the guerdon of mediocrity—mediocrity, which nobody wants, and we all despise; mediocrity, which, all the same, is so comfortable, and so prosperous, and so—common-sensible. Happy mediocrity! Who would take genius and misery in exchange for you? My dear Ada, mediocrity is the one thoroughly satisfactory and thoroughly satisfied thing in this world. Think of it! It never goes out of its mind, or off its head, or down on its knees; it never breaks its heart nor its fortunes; not at all. It lives respected and dies lamented, in its bed generally, of—repletion. My child, there's nothing for nothing in this world, not even genius. You can't get the radiant glory of genius and, at the same time, from the same source, the solid comforts of mediocrity."

He was silent, and his wife was silent, for some

minutes. Presently he smiled, and hummed a tune.

"What are you thinking of?" inquired Ada, who knew his methods.

"The Dis-improvement of the Human Race," he returned reflectively—"The Dis-improvement of the Human Race. It seems to me that, on the whole, we may believe in the dis-improvement of the human race. It is a grateful prospect. *I* shall start Loevio and Victoria as the pioneers. Cheer up, Ada! Divest your mind of petty desires. Think of the human race and its dis-improvement. Think—of—the pioneers. Hum!—I should like to see Aunt Doll."

Poor Aunt Doll! When it all got down to her in the big, lonely house at Farmley, she laid down her knitting-needles, and the scarlet serpentine garters trailed in the dust, and she felt herself beaten—owned herself beaten. It is a hard thing to have to own yourself beaten at seventy years old; but then, what is one old woman against the world? What is one old woman against youth and strength, and its wisdom and its ways? against all the swift tide of to-day? Yesterday cannot compete with to-day. Yesterday has no shadow of right over to-day. To-day *is* to-day; splendid and strong. Yesterday is—only yesterday; forgotten, done with, put away for ever.

Slow tears, strong tears, hard, hard tears of age, dropped on the shining knitting-needles, and left a stain of yellow rust. Tears—so easy in youth, so fresh, so flowing—open the sluice-gates and let them forth. See the rush of the soft water; the bright freshness which succeeds the rippling bath; the

sunshine once more, after the rain! But the tears of age, ah! they are hard; they are few, indeed and evil; there is no freshness after their scalding passage. None, none—in the days when the sunshine returns not after the rain!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

VICTORIA gave herself up to the contemplation of her own happiness.

For she was happy.

She cast aside every doubt; she looked away steadily from every shadow which her position inevitably entailed; she gazed only, with dazzled eyes, up to the great sun of her own exceeding happiness.

Heaven was upon earth, or earth had been caught up to heaven, with Victoria; and all this was because she was going to do a mad thing, the world said; a mad thing, her friends said; a thing that was worse than madness, those who loved her best declared loudly.

Nevertheless, she was going to do it.

And she was happy, because she was a woman —a woman in love.

Her father put before her plainly the magnitude of the risk. She admitted it frankly—at least, she admitted frankly that in any case except her own the justice of his apprehensions would be unanswerable; but not in her case. She was a woman in love. What can any man say that will carry reason to a woman in love?

Mr. Leathley did all he could. But Loevio was ready for him, and did all *he* could. And Loevio was able to do a good deal. So much, in fact,

that Mr. Leathley's misgivings were silenced, at any rate. Besides, Loevio had Victoria to uphold him, and Victoria was a host in herself—certainly where her father was concerned.

Loevio, too, was very frank. Admirably, charmingly frank, with Victoria, with her father, with them all; only none of them, except Victoria and her father, would even give him a hearing.

Indeed, under very trying circumstances Loevio behaved beautifully. But Loevio was no fool. The better he behaved, the more Victoria loved him; the greater the slights which her brothers and sisters put upon him, the greater were her endeavours, by every device of love, to do him honour. So Loevio let himself be slighted all day long. Perhaps he even courted such attentions, in order that Victoria's love for him might seek to atone for them.

He told her all about himself; of his father, who, in spite of his Italian name and parentage, had been an Englishman, born in England; of his mother, who was dead; of his own position, alone—since his parents' death—in the world. Apparently he had no brothers or sisters, no near relations.

He told them all this. He told them of his poverty, of his early struggles, of his loneliness; and something like tears stood in his beautiful blue eyes.

But he was rich now, he was famous now, he had troops of friends now, and it was by his own doing. He didn't *say* this certainly, but somehow this was the impression which his boyish frankness left on their minds; on Victoria's mind, especially. She

came to look upon him as a miracle of persevering industry, of noble endeavour, of patient endurance, of triumphant well-doing. His life, in her eyes, was a romance, his career a lyric poem.

No wonder Annesley was forgotten!—Jerry Annesley, whose life had assuredly not been in the least a romance, and who had had no career whatever. No wonder! How can the heart of woman resist a life which is a romance, a career which is a lyric poem?

The heart of woman cannot resist such things as these. And Victoria was a woman—a woman in love.

Love accounts for all things.

No doubt, love was accountable for the fact that the month of August still found Victoria at Rutland Gardens. Persons of Victoria's sort are not, as a rule, to be found in Rutland Gardens in the middle of the month of August.

It is possible that filial affection kept her there—a filial desire to relieve the enforced tedium of a weary legislator's detention in the land of bricks and mortar and sanitary science—a weary legislator, tied and bound throughout those sweltering days by the chain of much-wronged Ireland. It may have been so.

Beyond this there was, indeed, no apparent reason why Victoria should bake herself to a pie-crust with legislators at St. Stephen's. It was not likely that even the woes of Ireland would necessitate, at present, at all events, female legislation. In those hot, hot days of late summer, when strong young legislators fell off their seats from the heat, and even cabinet ministers rose in revolt—against waistcoats and chimney-pot hats—and covered their

heads with white straw, and their shirt-fronts with —nothing at all; when the thermometer stood at eighty-five in the shade, and at anything else you like—even boiling-point—in the sun, and in the House of Commons—specially in the House of Commons;—there was no reason, apparently, why Victoria, to whom the world was, according to the newspapers, looking for a new opera, should not have been writing it for the world, in, for instance, that cool, delicious avenue of beeches at Eastaston, where the whispering leaves might murmur soft nothings in her listening ears, and keep the sun from pouring down upon her too eagerly, as he shone forth in his might. No reason, apparently. Only that the stars of the theatrical firmament, and of the other firmaments whose scheme of existence is to amuse, had taken pity on the legislators whose scheme of existence is to do good by stealth—no, by Act of Parliament—and hope to find it fame, and were all here in town, singing, and acting, and making merry, even with the temperature at boiling-point—in the House of Commons.

Loevio was still in town; that was all.

Victoria was in Rutland Gardens; that was all.

Nevertheless, in Victoria's little boudoir, although it was nearly at the top of a house in Rutland Gardens, in the month of August, one might be in a worse place. Possibly Victoria thought so herself, as she lay on the sofa, with a book, which she was not reading, in her hand, with a cup of tea at her elbow, with the windows wide open, with lots of fresh roses everywhere in the room

and with the contemplation of her own feelings to afford the pastime of an idle moment. At the moment she was indeed dreamily conscious of the happiness of her love for Loevio, of the extreme gratification which the blended sweetness of different sorts of roses convey to the human nostril, and the keen joy which the brain of the creative artist experiences when it finds itself shaping out new and powerful images, which will find a place presently in certain definite forms of concrete beauty.

In plain English, to lie on a comfortable sofa, in a cool room, fragrant with fresh roses; to have a cup of tea, and no necessity to think or do anything disagreeable; is a pleasant interlude certainly in the feminine path of progress from the cradle to the grave.

The door of the pretty, cool, rose-scented room opened. In the doorway appeared the form of Parker, Victoria's maid.

"If you please, m'm," said Parker, advancing into the room, "a person desires to see you."

Victoria frowned.

"Persons" were now a daily experience, more wearying than gratifying. These persons were of many descriptions—persons, for example, who had composed music; persons, again, who were going to compose music; persons who would have liked to compose music; persons who, Victoria more than once wished, would compose themselves. Then there were other persons—those who played on all sorts of musical instruments; who played the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds (all kinds, truly, in every sense) of music. These persons usually wanted to play in a band

in some theatre, in any band, in any theatre—anywhere, in fact. Some of the persons were indefinite in their desires, or rather, indefinitely definite in their desires, as the persons who merely wished for *something* to do. While there were, on the contrary, persons whose desires had no definition at all, who did not wish for anything to do, or to do anything. There were, too, the persons who wanted advice. And, last of all, there were the persons who wanted—but stay, they *all* wanted—money.

"What sort of person?" asked Victoria, although she should have known better by this time.

Parker's features were guilty of a suppressed sniff. Her eyes fastened themselves abstractedly on an antique viol standing up in the corner facing her.

"Mr. Duckett said, if you please, m'm, that she is—just—a person, m'm."

Parker coughed drily. A faint, respectful cough.

"Tell Duckett to show her up," said Victoria after a barely perceptible moment of hesitation.

Parker closed the door on her own respectable presence, and Victoria took her feet off the sofa, and assumed an attitude more formal and less comfortable.

"This is another of the failures, I suppose, come to pour out her tale of woe. I am superstitious enough to feel convinced that I ought to listen; that it is only fair that I should listen and give comfort, if I can. I might so easily have been a failure myself. *So* easily! But—oh, good heavens! —fancy going about and saying so!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE door opened again. This time to admit the portly and respectful form of Duckett, and the person whom he ushered in with bland and silent condescension.

Victoria, looking the new-comer over from head to foot in one swift sweep of the eye, realised immediately that the vocabulary of the English language could yield no combination of words, descriptive or forcible, to more accurately define her visitor than that which the acute experience of Duckett had furnished.

"Won't you sit down?" Victoria, as she spoke, indicated a chair close at hand, and sat a little more upright herself in the corner of the sofa. She had not risen.

The visitor seated herself somewhat awkwardly. Her equilibrium was, in fact, slightly shaken, partly by the demeanour of Duckett, which was totally a novelty, and correspondingly embarrassing, and partly by her entrance. She had never, indeed, in her life been in any place at all like this little cool, flower-fragrant room, even though, afterwards, she came to the conclusion that there was nothing very remarkable about it at all; nor had she ever spoken to any one quite like the owner of the room. For a moment she could only stare at Victoria, thinking, meantime, that a simple, graceful dress of a pale

shade of mauve, and with a good deal of lace on it, would make any woman look well, even if the cotton stuff of which it was made could be got for tenpence-halfpenny the yard, any day, and although the dress itself was patently fresh from the wash-tub.

Victoria's rapid, clear accents went on speaking.

"If you would please say what it is you wish to see me for, as" (with a glance at a little clock on the corner of a cabinet book-case) "I am afraid I have not very much time to spare."

The girl whom she addressed looked at her for a minute in silence. She was, indeed, more than a girl; but she scarcely looked more at first sight, although deliberate scrutiny revealed faint lines about her mouth, and under her eyes, which betokened that, whatever her years might be, she had lived long enough to be pretty well worn by life and its burdens. Victoria, looking at her, thought she was not a bad specimen of the London girl of her class, which was distinctly that of the very lower middle. She did not look bold, or rude, or aggressive in any way. Her dress was a fairly accurate, if a cheap copy of that style of costume which the patrons of Redfern like to wear on four occasions out of six. It wanted, it is true, the perfection of neatness, and the exquisiteness of flawless cleanliness which, in Redfern's patrons, would have been everywhere present; nor would the latter have substituted a pink ribbon bow at the collar for the regulation well-tied tie, or worn grey silk gloves in preference to Suède or kid. But these, after all, were trifling divergencies; only they were just the trifles which made all the difference.

Nevertheless, Victoria, withdrawing her eyes from the grey silk gloves and the pink ribbon bow to the face above, thought what a pretty face it must have been ten years ago. She could fancy what a delicate rose-tinge must have been in the cheeks that were quite worn aad faded now, and how the soft, childish radiance of the still lustrous brown eyes, which just matched the thick waves of clustering brown hair, must have completed the beauty of a face not even now unattractive.

Victoria smiled into the shy brown eyes reassuringly. They had a wistful look that touched her. They seemed to say that their owner had passed the days of her best happiness. Victoria, in the full tide of her happiness, felt a pang of regret at the remembrance of how sad a world it is, after all. Just then she would have liked every one to be as happy as herself.

She smiled reassuringly again. So much so, that her visitor found her voice at last.

"I—I wanted to see you," she began hesitatingly; "you—you were very good to my poor sister."

Victoria had been correct in her estimate. Her visitor, when she spoke, was unmistakably a Londoner. Her voice and accent were gentle and musical; when she spoke further her "h's" were not *super*-abundant, anyhow; but her "a's" had clearly the horrid "i" sound, which, without anything else, stamped the speaker and her class hopelessly.

"You were so good to my poor sister," she continued gently—"Annie Merks."

Victoria's face changed. An expression of real interest flashed over it.

"Annie Merks," she exclaimed quickly. "*You* are Annie Merks' sister. Ah, poor thing, I assure you I was quite, quite grieved when I heard of her death. It was *so* sad—so awful! I was at Milan just then."

"You were very kind," returned her visitor, in a low tone; "you were very, very kind. She talked a *lot* about you. It was 'Miss Leathley, Miss Leathley,' always with her. And she was so set on being a great singer some day!"

"But she would have been, you know," said Victoria eagerly; "her voice was really superb! Oh, I was so sorry. It was terrible!"

She paused suddenly. Her mind recalled the poor dead girl—the girl who had been only a village schoolmistress, but who had a splendid career in her magnificent voice, put, as it were, into her hand, only to be snatched away before any good thing could come of it, by the horrible accident of five minutes. A little chill struck on Victoria's heart.

"And I," she thought, "I have *everything*."

"So you," she said, looking again fixedly at the face opposite to her, "you are Annie Merks' sister? Yes, you *are* like her—in some respects."

She did not add—but she thought it, all the same—that the living sister's face was a much prettier one than that of the dead sister's had been. She looked at the living face again, and added kindly,—

"What can I do for you? We were all at Eastaston very fond of your sister; and the children in the school adored her. I assure you the fame of her voice is quite a tradition in the village. Were you with her when she died?"

The other's face flushed.

"No, miss," she said hurriedly. "I—I—was not—able—to be there."

"Indeed!" Victoria's face, as she uttered the word, was full of sympathy. "But your mother was with her? I remember how terribly I pitied your mother when I heard of it. You see, I was abroad all that year, or I should have so much liked to have seen her. Your mother—er—is she alive?"

"Oh—yes—she's alive."

"And you?" said Victoria. "Do you teach, or——?"

She stopped abruptly, and bit her lip, with a slight sensation of amusement at her own embarrassment. Somehow—precisely how she could not have explained—but somehow, in some mysterious fashion, she seemed to become aware that the slight, worn-looking woman sitting opposite to her, was not an unmarried girl.

The latter's face turned white.

"I," she began huskily—"I——." She paused, and stirred helplessly in her chair. She looked at Victoria once more—a long, intent, apologetic gaze. Evidently Victoria's face reassured yet again.

"Miss Leathley!" she exclaimed quickly, after the slight pause, "Miss Leathley, you won't be angry with me—will you, miss? But I came to you because—I'm in trouble."

She twisted her fingers in their grey silk gloves as she spoke, one in and out of the other, in the extreme of nervous excitement.

Victoria smiled kindly again; but all the same she thought it well to say at once,—

"I must tell you that I *never* give money. I make that rule, except under certain circumstances."

The expression on her visitor's face, as she said it, convinced Victoria that her first impression had been a right one; whatever this woman had come for, she had not come for money.

'*I* don't want money, Miss Leathley," she said, with as much absolute composure as if she lived in the next house. Her face flushed the next moment. She seemed at a loss how to proceed farther. Victoria came to her rescue.

"Won't you tell me your trouble?" she said gently. Her own happiness made her feel very gently towards any trouble. "Perhaps I may be able to advise you, or to help you."

The other raised her eyes as Victoria spoke, and Victoria thought she saw tears shining in them.

"You *can* help me, Miss Leathley," she murmured; "only—you—won't be angry with me? I will tell you how it is."

Victoria smiled again, reassuringly, and leaned back against the end of the sofa. Resting one elbow on the cushions, her hand, lying on her breast, closed tenderly over a tiny gold heart, set with pearls, one of Loevio's first gifts to her, and which hung round her neck by a fine gold chain. Her eyes watched her visitor's face closely.

She was very sorry for the latter, but she wished all the same that she would not keep on biting the fingers of her grey silk gloves one after the other in her embarrassment.

"I was a fool, miss," she began again huskily—"an awful fool, and I'm, I'm—a fool still. But—when my sister Annie went to your school, I was married. I was two years married then."

Victoria smiled faintly. She didn't seem to see

what this was to lead to. But the trouble was patent in the woman's face, and so she waited to hear more.

"Bad husband, I suppose?" she said to herself.

The thought had scarcely formulated itself, when the other's next words corroborated it.

"Two years," she repeated. "Two years of horror and misery. I hated him," she continued passionately; "but he was very well off, and they talked me into it. They talked, and persuaded, and never let me alone. I wonder how many wretched, miserable creatures are persuaded and over-persuaded into—*hell*, hell upon earth. We, my mother I mean, kept an eating-house in the Mile End Road—it's well known; Swardills and Merks, on the left-hand side; "Swardills" it's generally called—and he was a traveller, a commercial traveller; he travelled for a big furniture house, and he was a cousin, distantly, of my mother's. I never liked him, because I—liked somebody else. That was what made it so hard. I liked somebody else. But he was away, out of London altogether, and at home they kept persuading me and never stopped. And, besides, I was a bit hurt that the one I *did* care for had gone away just without saying a word, though we'd always been such friends—and—sometimes I thought we'd be something more. And I gave in."

She looked at Victoria's face; but she found, in the steady gaze of the small, dark eyes, something which reassured her.

"Miss Leathley," she said again impulsively, "he was very bad to me. He had the horriblest temper you could ever know. And he was so cunning, he could keep his temper down long enough; and

be as sweet as sugar when he pleased. He took my mother and all of them in. None of us ever thought, till after I married him, that he had that temper. I'll say that for mother. But she was too eager for the wedding. He'd great wages, and he was a clever business man, and he always told mother he'd set up for himself one day soon. She was too eager; too eager. Dear heaven, ye'd think women—mothers—with all they know, 'ud hate to see their daughters given to any man. They don't, anyhow, and my mother, even when she found 'Enery out, she was always preachin' patience to me. Patience—with a fiend like that! He *was* a fiend. No one but himself 'ud think of the things he'd do. He was that tyrannical, miss, and he hadn't a heart in his breast, that man! I was very ill after I was married—very ill—from the hard treatment he gave me. He'd keep me shut up for days and days doin' house-work There was months he wouldn't keep a servant. And I was ill and weak, miss, and not able to stand on my feet, and I'd never been used to house-work—scrubbing and suchlike. I was only just out o' school when I married. I hated him. I nearly went mad, and sometimes when he'd be away travellin' he'd drink a good deal, and it didn't improve his temper. Then——"

She paused; her face turned paler.

"I won't keep you long, Miss Leathley, but I want you to understand. And then you won't be so angry with me. . . . The other came back to London—the one, the man I'd always cared for. And—the worst of it was—that he wouldn't keep away from me. I did my best to keep him away; but it was no use. He was very quick and clever, and he soon saw what

'Enery was, and what he didn't see he found out. He was very clever; there was nothing he couldn't find out. And he was very kind-hearted, the kindest-hearted man could be—in some ways—and he said he'd go mad to see what my life was. He was always telling me that, always. He used to come—when 'Enery was away—and—from the time almost that he came first, to the end—he never was done trying to persuade me to—leave—my 'usband."

Her voice sank lower. She spoke monotonously now.

"I know it was wrong, miss—I know it was—to listen to him, but—he'd never stop, and I—cared for him. One time he stopped coming altogether for weeks. I don't know what I did. I was nearly out of my mind, thinking he was so offended because I wouldn't listen to him, he'd never come again. And he was all the comfort I had in life, miss; and I was weak and ill, and I'd lost my baby. I'd to thank 'Enery for *that.* And when he *did* come again I—told him I'd do anything he wished. He was nearly beside himself with delight. And he swore he'd marry me when 'Enery got a divorce. He said 'Enery'd get a divorce fast enough, because 'Enery used to be castin' in my teeth some rich widder *he* said was dyin' about him, so——"

She paused again.

Victoria, still watching her steadily, pitied her; yet involuntarily, when she spoke, her voice was several degrees colder.

"Was there nobody who could have helped you?" she said, breaking the silence. "No friend or clergyman?"

The woman looked at her.

"Miss Leathley," she said quickly, and there was a touch of dreary sarcasm in the words, "there's no good going to friends or clergymen when your life's not worth living, and when your heart's set on something. I didn't want any one to tell me it was wrong. I knew all that well enough. I knew my mother'd shut her door on me to the last day of my life. I knew it. But I knew 'Enery. My God, I knew 'Enery! Clergyman! Could any clergyman change 'Enery's temper?—I went away with him, Miss Leathley—with the man I cared for. He was very good to me—very good to me. It was like heaven upon earth being with him. And he was so sweet-tempered and easy-going! I'd have *died* for him, he was so sweet-tempered. He was well off, too; his father had been a pork-butcher, and had left him five thousand pounds or more. He was his only son. So we were very comfortable."

"And your husband?" said Victoria, at this point.

The girl, facing her, smiled bitterly.

"Oh, he married the rich widder, and *she's* led him a life! He was an awful coward, 'Enery, for all his tyrannical temper, and she had a temper that frightened the life out of him. If I could have done that I'd have had a better life with him."

Involuntarily Victoria smiled with amusement. The speaker looked so manifestly incapable of *frightening* even a mouse. She smiled again, with less coldness, too, at her visitor.

"Then of course there was a divorce?" she said at once.

"Yes," said the other hurriedly.

"And your second husband?" continued Victoria. "He was a good husband, you say?"

She said it half carelessly. It seemed to her that this person was relating a sad, but extremely commonplace story, without, so far as could be seen, any definite reason why she, Victoria Leathley, should be made the recipient of it.

There was a pause.

"Miss Leathley"—the speaker's voice, either from fear, or from resistless determination, was intensely sharpened—"Miss Leathley—that—that is the trouble. That's why I came to you. He—he didn't—wouldn't marry me, after all."

"Oh!"

The monosyllable, uttered by Victoria, perhaps involuntarily, contained an ominous intonation. She made, perhaps involuntarily, also, a slight, expressive movement of repugnance.

The face of the other flushed, and turned pale.

"Oh, wait!" she cried. "Wait! Let me tell you all! Let me tell you—all!"

She leaned forward as she said it, and stretched out her hand imploringly.

Victoria's face was scarcely encouraging. Yet there was something so foreign to blatant and unashamed wrongdoing in the whole appearance and demeanour of this strange person, that, in spite of herself, she was moved. She said nothing, but sat very still, and her eyes never left the other's face.

"Let me tell you," whispered the latter. Her voice had sunk again almost to a whisper. "He said he would—but—after the divorce, he kept—putting me off. First he said we'd have to wait a bit for the lawyers, or something. I don't know. But I begged and prayed him. I'd have left him

but I couldn't"—her face flushed scarlet—"I couldn't *then*; but I prayed him on my knees—because—of—the child. He said he would, and he would, but he didn't. And then, one day, my mother came to see me. It was just after 'Enery married the widder. My mother'd been very hard on me, but now, she said, she'd forgive us both, as we'd been married and had the divorce and all. Miss Leathley,"—her head sank lower—"I told her we were married, and that I'd got the best of husbands, and that there was nothing he wouldn't do for me, and no end to his goodness—which there wasn't—only the one thing; and we made it up, mother and I, and them all. When I told him, and begged and prayed him to make it true, he laughed and laughed, and he kissed me, and said it was the best joke he ever knew to do the old lady—there's never been too much love lost between him and mother—and that *he'd* never undeceive her, and that I was the cleverest little girl in the world. Every time I'd speak to him, he'd laugh. I used to fret, but you *couldn't* be angry with him. He was so gentle, and so sweet-tempered, and he'd take such care of me! Even mother used to make fun of the care he took of me. But talk to him of anything else, it was no use. I had to give it up. And—after—the first child was born, it seemed no use—so I—said no more. But he was always good to me, and my mother, or one of them, never knew. Never to this day!"

Victoria felt and looked shocked and perplexed.

"They all were satisfied, and I kept it up, and so did he. And they're as proud of him now as can be—as proud as can be, and my mother—most

of all. There's—none of her grandchildren—can rightly please her—only mine. But—now—now—after all these years—he's going to leave me—Miss Leathley—he's wanting to get married; he's *going* to get married, and I—and my mother—and my children——"

Victoria looked exceedingly distressed. She knew that it was her duty to point out the inevitable consequences of sin and deception; but with that white, anguished face looking at her, she was powerless to do more than look distressed, and say,—

"I am very sorry indeed for your trouble. But I fear I cannot——"

She stopped. Something in the wild anguish of the brown eyes arrested her.

"What can *I* do?" she said helplessly.

There was a sudden, strained silence—a strange, unnatural moment of silence.

Victoria's visitor, leaning more forward in her chair, covered her face with her hands.

"Miss Leathley"—the words, as they passed her lips, were nearly inarticulate—"I—I—Miss Leathley."

She let her hands fall down from her face. Her eyes, faltering, shrinking, reminding Victoria of a dog's which feared the lash, fixed themselves on the proud, delicate, pallid face.

"He wants—to—marry—and he isn't—in my rank of—life—now. He's a great—man—and I—and there's—a lady——"

The eyes of the two women facing one another so closely, looked each into the other's. There was another second—only one second—of silence, horrible, intense silence. Only one short second; but a lifetime

to one—a lifetime wherein agony accumulated, piled itself up, layer over layer. One second—only one—while the eyes of the two women looked each into the other's.

Victoria stood up.

"Don't," she cried hoarsely, almost beneath her breath, "don't—tell me—any more."

She trembled in every limb, and recoiled with sudden aversion, incapable of disguise, from the shrinking creature huddled up on the chair before her.

A wild whirl of emotion and anger swept over her a moment later.

"How *dare* you!" she said breathlessly, and her face grew whiter with anger. "How *dare* you come here to me with this *infamous* story!" Her hand, clasping the gold heart, closed upon it with the strength of pure anger, and the fragile chain snapped and broke. Chain and pendant fell loose from her neck.

The creature huddled up on the chair stretched out her hands imploringly.

"Miss Leathley, don't look like that. It's true, before God, every word! Ah, you think I've no right to speak—to speak to *you*, least of all. But if he marries, I'm ruined—I and my children. And I could never bear the shame of it now, I can't—I *can't*." The words were like so many notes of anguish wrung from her white lips.

Victoria's face hardened. Her lips curled.

"Had you thought of all that sooner," she said icily, "you would have been *wiser*, to say the least of it."

The other panted, and blushed rosy red.

"I—I—*loved* him," she gasped faintly. "He can make any one love him."

Victoria grew deadly white. Her eyes flashed.

"Have the goodness to leave this room," she said quickly, "and the house. Go!"

"Miss Leathley, don't be angry. Ah, listen, listen! I was mad to come, but when he first told me what he thought of doing I nearly went mad. I *did* go mad. And he won't come near to me now. And my mother is angry; she's been going on for a long time—ever since he got to be so famous as a singer, and took the foreign name altogether, and lived at the West End; she's been displeased at his not having me and the children with him, and I've tried to put her off. But now, what can I do? It'll kill me!" She wailed out the words helplessly, feebly. "It'll kill me! But —when I—found out it was *you*—Miss Leathley—you—might have struck me without my feeling it. You that are out of his rank, miles out of his rank! And he's so proud of that. He's nearly *boasted* of it to me. He can't keep in the pride sometimes."

Victoria turned away sharply. She felt she must hide the anguish of her face somehow. She could not speak.

"I'm sorry," pursued the other. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry! But, think of me; and—my children, my children! I nearly went mad, but I thought Miss Leathley, that Annie loved, would help me, and I said I'd tell her all. And it would be a sin *not* to tell you, to let you be deceived, and tricked; to let you——"

Victoria turned her face once more to the speaker. She raised her hand with a certain swift gesture of authority.

"Stop," she said quickly; and the other did stop speaking instantly.

Victoria, standing up, looked down in the worn, white face. Her own eyelids fluttered faintly—a curious, insolent flutter, feminine and indescribable. Nothing more insulting in its way can be conceived.

"You want money," she said, almost in her usual clear, cold accents. "Persons who force their way with stories such as yours require to be dealt with by proper authority. You want money; you will get none from *me*. On the contrary, I shall take care to prevent anything of this kind recurring."

And while she said it Victoria *knew* that the woman gazing up at her did not want money. She *knew* it. Ah, God, she knew it!

The person she addressed stood up. The colour rose and flooded her cheeks. Something akin to dignity was reflected in face and figure.

"I do not want money," she said quietly, very quietly; "and I shall not trouble you again, Miss Leathley. What I have said is true. Do you wish to know if what I have told you is true? You can easily do so. Oh, if it were not true, if it were not true, would I be here?"

Her voice broke suddenly. She covered her face with her hands, and burst into tears.

"Miss Leathley," she cried once more, looking into the dark, cold eyes, "what am I to do? Think of me! Think of what it will be to me! My mother! It will break her heart! She is not a young woman, and she has had a great deal of trouble, and this will kill her. My God, have pity —on me, Miss Leathley!"

Victoria moved impatiently. She felt that she *hated* this woman; and yet the voice touched her. A lump rose in her throat. Something choked her utterance. The scalding tears rose to her own eyelids.

She sank back against the sofa. A sensation of physical weakness and faintness for a moment overpowered her. The horror of it all and of her own position was only beginning to make its way to her brain. Only beginning, but beginning, truly. Yet her heart clung to its idol.

"It is a lie," she said to herself—"a vile trick of spite or envy. No man could ever succeed like Louis without making enemies."

It was a brave thought. But the face near her own put it to confusion. Brave thoughts turn cowards sometimes.

Victoria grasped the soft cushion of the sofa. She looked again at her companion.

"So far," she said quietly, "I have only your word for this—this extraordinary story." She steadied herself resolutely, and continued. "I believe you are Annie Merks' sister. You ought to be a respectable woman. If you are lying, God forgive you! If I find that you have lied to me, I warn you there will be very little mercy for you!"

"It's true," cried the other, "it's true, it's true!"

Victoria put up her hand.

"That will do," she said calmly. "I shall take every care to find out if it *is*."

"Miss Leathley," said her visitor breathlessly, "ask him if his name is Loevio. Ask him did he ever hear of Joseph Higgins?"—she said "'Iggins," in her excitement, but corrected herself quickly. "I

know he never lets his grand friends, his West-End friends, know his father was a pork-butcher in the Mile End Road. He never could bear the shop. I know him all my life, for Joseph Higgins, the father, had our trade for many a year; but—Lewis—wouldn't never do a turn in the shop. He was all for music and singing. And his father idolised him; he was a middle-aged man when Lew was born (we always call him Lew), and he'd lost two other young sons, and he set all the more store by the one child left to him. He was awful proud of Lew's beauty, which was extraordinary, for his father and mother were both as plain as could be. And he let him do as he liked. He gave him the grandest education. He was at a private academy for five years at Clapham. And then, when he'd do nothing but music, he let him have money in his pocket, and tutors, and go to France and the Continent. He sold the business out-and-out when the old man died, and he wouldn't use the name of Higgins from that day out. He picked up the foreign name in France, or somewhere. And he's like a foreigner, with his beautiful hair, and keeps himself dressed to look like one. Ask him, Miss Leathley, ask him this."

Victoria was deathly white—deathly white, and struggling with a horrible inclination to laugh.

"Loevio and his early struggles. His poverty, his loneliness!"

The hideous grotesqueness of it all struck on her lacerated, quivering nerves. She could have laughed aloud.

She could not, dared not speak, until the horrible inclination to laughter had exhausted itself.

But her visiter's loquacity continued unchecked. There was something pitiful in her eagerness to prove everything, to corroborate everything up to the hilt. "Miss Leathley, you're—a lady—and *he's* only just what I've said. Miss Leathley, *you* won't——"

She stopped.

"I beg your pardon, miss! I beg your pardon, miss! I had—no—right——"

She faltered, and her voice failed utterly.

Yet Victoria had not spoken. She had looked at her—merely looked at her; that was all.

She turned pale, and in her confusion began biting the fingers of her gloves once more. There was a moment's silence. Victoria was nerving herself to speak, endeavouring to collect her confused thoughts. The other's eyes wandered up and down aimlessly. In a moment they fell upon the antique viol, standing up gracefully against a corner cabinet.

"Lor'!" she exclaimed faintly, her surprise giving her utterance. "So *that* was what he wanted the old fiddle for! I never could make out why he bought it. Well, I never! 'Whatever upon earth made you buy *that*?' said I to him, when he sent me to Hermann with a pound to pay for it. He kept it for years, and he had me polishing it for days after he got it." She smiled. "Well, such a thing to give anybody *I* never saw."

Again came that horrible desire to laugh. Victoria, as she felt it, trembled again. She felt that she *must* laugh—or cry. Ah, it would be easier to cry *now*. For, *wha* a liar he was! Victoria shuddered. It hurt her—hurt her heart. A liar! Somehow that poor, pitiful tissue of lies about the old viol hurt

her with a keenness disproportionate perhaps to its offence. All in a moment the remembrance of the concert in Park Lane came back to her—Loevio's eager, nervous face, every word he spoke as they walked down the staircase together. She could have smiled now at the deception, it was so pitiful, so trivial, so poor—smiled; but her heart felt sore. It hurt her, this small, accidental revelation—so small, and so accidental, but so significant. Such a shabby, pretentious little bit of untruthfulness; so unworthy, so *ungentlemanly*—the thought smote her sharply. What a contempt Jerry Annesley would have for this man! The colour rose up in Victoria's cheeks.

"Where did—this—this viol come from?" she said suddenly, with an unconquerable desire to know everything.

The other looked perplexed.

"I don't know, miss. *He* bought it from a Jew dealer, a friend of his, named Hermann. He'd a cold and sore throat that day, and couldn't go himself, so he sent me to fetch it home and to pay for it. That's how I knew about it. He kept it ever since. But some time ago he came one day in a great fuss to—our place, *my* place—we've a house in Camden Town, Hawkesworth Terrace, it's a good house—he's always been good in *those* ways to me and the children. Well, he wanted the old viol, he said, in a great fuss; and he made me polish it up again. He said he was going to give it to Mr. Ford, Mr. Watkin Ford, of the Critic Theatre, and he said he was glad to pay Mr. Ford the compliment, for he was under obligations to him; and I knew he was."

"When was this?" Victoria interposed quickly.

"About a month ago," was the reply.

Victoria felt dazed and stupid.

A month ago Loevio had given the viol to her. She put her hand to her head, over her eyes.

"I can't bear it," she said to herself. "I can't —bear it—any longer."

She turned towards the fireplace and rang the bell.

"I cannot—talk to you—any longer," she said, turning once more to her companion. "Don't come here any more—do you hear? I shall make *every* inquiry necessary, and——"

"God bless you, Miss Leathley!" said the other impulsively. "God bless you, miss! I knew *you'd* never ruin a poor woman and her innocent children, let alone marry a——"

"Oh hush, please!"

The words, still more the accents in which they were spoken, brought the ready tears to the other's eyes.

"Don't despise me, Miss Leathley. It's hard for ladies, ladies like you, to understand."

Victoria's face grew harder and colder.

"That will do," she said quickly. "Never come here again," she added immediately. "Never let me *see* you again, for God's sake!"

She uttered the last words under her breath, to herself alone.

The room door opened.

The woman standing where she had risen from her chair, and Victoria standing near, turned, both of them, at the sound.

Victoria, who had rung for a servant to show

her visitor out, turned perhaps a shade more quickly, saying at the same time, in a voice studiedly free from all traces of emotion,—

"Show this person out, if you pl——"

The word arrested hung inarticulate upon her lips. Her eyes dilated. Her hands fell down helplessly to her side.

Loevio stood in the doorway.



Leovio, motionless in the doorway, looked livid.—*Page 323*

CHAPTER XXX.

FOR an interval of time which barely covered half a minute, the three stared each at the other.

Victoria, rooted to the spot, felt her heart stop beating. The woman beside her sank helplessly on a chair close at hand. Loevio, motionless in the doorway, looked livid. His face was almost distorted; his hands clenched themselves convulsively; his eyes were terrible. Victoria, at the sight of the latter, quailed for a moment.

Quite suddenly he rushed across the room. In one second he was close to the shrinking figure, which cowered still farther down in the chair, and shook like an aspen leaf at his approach.

He looked mad—if ever passion made a man mad. The veins stood out on his forehead; there was froth on his lips; his face grew paler and paler, more deathly white.

He bent over the shrinking figure.

"You——"

Victoria flung herself between them. Shielding the woman sitting beneath her by her own body, she stretched out her hands and grasped his.

"Don't!" she cried quickly. "Oh, don't, for God's sake!"

She raised her eyes as she said it for one lightning flash to his; and as they met his she knew the worst. For eyes turn traitor soonest.

One sharp, long, quivering pain ran through her heart—through, right through, once, and again—and again.

"My beloved!" Loevio whispered to her.

"Shut the door—at once," she said authoritatively.

He obeyed her without a word.

Victoria stooped over the sitting woman as Loevio returned.

"Listen," she said, in equal, measured accents, very unlike her own. "Tell me *now* if what you have been saying to me is true."

The other raised her head.

"It—is—true."

She burst into tears.

"Oh, Lew, Lew, don't be angry with me! You drove me to it. You did, you did! And for you to think of a—lady—like—Miss Leathley—and never—to think of your—unfortunate chil—dren——"

Victoria, for the second time, held Loevio back.

"Send her away!" he said breathlessly. "Send her away! send her away!" His voice, as he repeated it, grew in intensity of tone till the words were hissed from between his clenched teeth. "*Send her away*, or—God Almighty—only—knows—what I'll do to her. Oh—h—*you*——"

The expression of his face was frightful.

With one hand Victoria raised the woman from the chair; with the other she kept Loevio back.

"You must go," she said gently to the former. "Please go at once."

The other offered no opposition. She looked scared to death. She was sobbing wildly.

The sound of her sobs seemed to awake a fresh accession of fury in Loevio.

His chest heaved. In the abandonment of passion he almost flung Victoria out of his way.

"Let me," he muttered furiously, "*let* me get at her, the——"

With all her force Victoria clung to his arm.

"No," she exclaimed resolutely, "no, no." She pushed him back and held him, her hands pressed against his breast. "Are you mad?" she added quickly, looking up undaunted into his face. "Do you wish to have every servant in the house here in a minute? Stand back! Ah—don't hurt her, don't touch her—for *my* sake. Wait for me here, till I come back."

She drew the woman with her towards the door, and her eyes fixed themselves imploringly on Loevio.

"Wait for me," she said again.

His frame shook from head to foot. As she spoke his strength seemed, all in a moment, to forsake him. He sank quite suddenly down on the sofa where Victoria had been sitting. His face turned grey, and he looked faint. He covered his face with his hands as the two women crossed the room and went out of the door together.

Outside on the landing Victoria turned once more to her visitor.

"Go," she said again very gently. "Go at once. No. Don't speak."

She stood at the head of the stairs, and watched the shrinking figure as it shambled stupidly down the long staircase. She stood there till she heard the hall door bang.

Then she went back to Loevio.

He raised his head as she entered the room. His

face had regained, even in the brief interval, a faint tinge of its usual florid colouring. When he saw Victoria alone his eyes softened. He stood up, and with his shaking hands made a faint attempt to re-arrange his thick, clustering hair, while involuntarily he smoothed the front of his coat. His passion was as evanescent as it was furious in its intensity. The traces of it were likewise of comparatively short duration.

There was a short pause as he stood up. Victoria, halfway across the room, halted. She looked haggard, and her face was drawn. For the moment she even looked feeble. All at once she and Loevio seemed to have changed places. He it was who now assumed, as it were, command of the situation.

He moved towards her quickly as her steps ceased.

If he looked, to a certain extent, uneasy, he spoke easily, at any rate. His voice had almost regained its usual delicious *timbre*, the pure musicalness of the tenor notes which, more than any other, produce distinct effect upon the accents of speech.

"Victoria"—he lingered upon her name with an intonation that was a caress—"what can I say? How can I tell you how annoyed I am at your being subjected to——" He paused abruptly. "*How* white and tired you look! Won't you sit down, my dearest? You must sit here and rest."

He put out his hands to draw her towards the sofa, but they barely reached the outermost flutter of her dress, for she drew back instantly.

Loevio tried to smile.

Victoria looked at him steadily. Her eyes were dark and cold, and the curious intensity of expression

in them, which lingered beneath the upper coldness, reminded Loevio more forcibly than ever of the eyes which Beethoven's portraits have made familiar to us. Her lips were parted, yet, just for a second, she did not speak. When she did, her voice sounded weak, like the voice of a person who has undergone bodily illness. She spoke with intense effort. But she spoke, all the same.

"It is best," she said slowly, "to let us end this as quickly as possible. You came in before—that—woman went away. I suppose you know—at least, you conjectured; I saw *that*—what it was she came for, what it was she told me?"

She paused. Her eyes were fixed on his face. The latter changed.

Loevio's command of facial expression was, as a rule, that of an actor. He had regained it by this time.

His face now showed anger and coldness. He flung out his hands, and shrugged his shoulders slightly, with an admirable calculation of requisite gesture.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, suiting the word to the gesture, "I am condemned—without a hearing. Trust a *woman* for that!"

A little colour came up in Victoria's cheeks. Her eyes softened. Her whole face grew irresolute.

"No," she said quickly; "oh no! Explain *everything*, if you will—or can."

Loevio smiled again.

He turned his hands palms outwards; he raised his eyebrows.

"My dearest"—there was grave, tender rebuke in the words—"do you think these matters are quite

for you? I think they are not at all for you; not at all for you!"

Victoria looked at him again.

"I don't know what you *mean*," she said haughtily.

Loevio was taken aback. For once he was thoroughly at a loss. His experience of womankind, if extensive, was limited; it extended only within a certain circle. The circle was wide, certainly, but it was only a circle. He was afraid of Victoria, but still more desperately afraid of blundering.

Victoria's face changed. She uttered a little cry. She looked at him once more, and her whole face quivered.

"Oh," she said piteously, "why, why did you do it?"

The weakness which would not be controlled, the feminine impulse which for the moment overrode even anger, touched him at once.

"My darling," he cried quickly, "trust me! Leave me to deal with these disagreeable matters. Forget it. Trust me, Victoria."

She turned from him as if the words cut her to the heart. Her eyes fell on the old viol. She bit her lip till it nearly bled.

"Trust him!" The words mocked her. Once more she looked at him. Her voice was hoarse when she spoke again.

"You bought that viol from a Jew dealer. Why did you tell me that it had belonged to your family—that it had been given to your grandmother?"

Loevio laughed. But the laugh had a false note in it.

"Did I tell you that, darling? Oh, well, I should

have said it belonged to my *uncle*. What? Don't you see the joke?"

Victoria stared at him.

He seemed perfectly unashamed. But he was not unashamed; on the contrary, he was furiously ashamed of her discovering that his family could not boast an heirloom.

A curious feeling grasped the girl's heart. It was not disgust—not quite—yet; but the first step towards it.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, with a quick gesture of repugnance.

Loevio looked puzzled.

"Well, I bought it really, just for you; just to have the pleasure of showing it to you; just because you took an interest in it. I did indeed, upon my soul."

Victoria moved impulsively. She came close to him, closer than she had been yet, and laid her hand on his arm. Her lips trembled as his eyes met her up-turned ones.

"Louis," she said softly; "don't break my heart."

He caught her to him passionately, before she had time to resist.

"My dear love, my own, my darling, trust me! Victoria, Victoria, you don't know, you can't know what you are to me—how I love you! My beloved, you are the whole world to me—my life, my happiness, my—heaven!"

As the passionate words left his lips she freed herself from his embrace. Her face changed. A little cold sneer twisted her lips. Her eyes flashed.

"Oh," she said sneeringly, "did you say all

that to—the other woman too—the poor, unhappy girl whom you tempted—and ruined—and flung aside?"

Loevio changed colour. His lips hardened. He laughed—a sneering laugh, too.

"Oh-h!" he exclaimed, with a certain inflexion in his voice; "the old story! My dear Victoria, you force me to it; but I assure you I should never have supposed you likely to take refuge in the old, stock melodramatic *scream*!"

Victoria looked at him intently. A change came over the current of her feelings. Quite suddenly the intensity of her own personal emotion seemed to lessen, and, with corresponding force, the critical faculty of her mind, which, when she was with Loevio, was so much in abeyance, to reassert itself. He, without knowing the cause, perceived the effect. The change in her whole demeanour perplexed him first, but relieved him next.

He believed it was due to the salutary effect of his own attitude and words throughout.

He was about to speak, when she interposed.

"Wait," she said quietly. "Let us talk this —this—question out fairly. We are neither of us children; it is absurd to treat the—matter as if we were."

Loevio looked blandly acquiescent.

Victoria, proceeding, watched him closely; more closely than perhaps he was aware.

"That woman—who was here"—her voice was slightly lowered, and not quite so clear or rapid as usual—"came to me, because your—marriage—will ruin—her."

Loevio was about to speak, but she put up her hand.

"I know who the woman is. I knew her sister. They are respectable people. She can have no object whatever in persisting in the—account which she gave me of her life—except money—or the object which *she* declares is hers. She says she does not want money, and I believe her. I am forced to believe her. She wants that which is dearer to most women—her good name." Victoria's voice softened. "Poor creature, her good name."

Loevio smiled.

"My innocent darling, what do you know, what *can* you know, of 'poor creatures' such as that?"

Victoria turned white. She felt as if a whip's lash had cut across her face. It was the first unconscious revelation of the nature of the man before her. For a moment she quailed. She quailed at the possibilities which might be dragged to light if she persisted. For a moment the temptation was strong—only God and herself knew how strong—to cut short the trial of this thing, and to let him go while yet some belief in him was possible. By persisting, she was going to do more than merely deny herself a few years of supposititious happiness; she was going, probably, to tear out the fibres of her heart, one by one, in deliberate, self-inflicted torture. Was it worth it? The question flashed vividly across her mind. Was it worth it to injure her whole being for the sake of sifting the character of this man who had taken possession of her whole heart? Victoria quivered. The sifting! Why sift? She quivered, and her heart winced. Why sift? Only to escape the bare possibility of doing an injustice to him, in one direction or another. Was it worth it?

Loevio saw the hesitation, and fancied he saw an advantage.

"My dearest," he said persuasively, "I am inclined to be a trifle old-fashioned perhaps, but do you think the attitude of the present day is altogether an admirable one in putting men on their trial, so to speak, for every indiscretion?"

He stopped and smiled deprecatingly, as he saw Victoria's eyes again looking at him fixedly.

"Indiscretion!" she repeated slowly. "Do you call it indiscretion to tempt a young, innocent, unhappy woman to break the law of God and man, and then to basely deceive her, and leave her to bear *all* the consequences alone? Do you call that indiscretion? No, don't answer too quickly."

Loevio shrugged his shoulders.

"M—well—I'll call it anything you like. *Personally*, I dislike excessively discussing, even remotely, such an affair with you; but as you seem determined to do it, and to know all, and judge all, why—there is no more to be said."

A tightness gripped Victoria's heart as he spoke, Her whole heart was in her eyes as she raised her face to his again.

"Louis," she whispered—and it seemed to her that she was pleading with herself, with him, for something that was slipping away—away, ah, God! so fast!—"you didn't mean at first to—to—trick her? You meant at first to—marry her, didn't you?"

Loevio looked at her. There was a little silence—a silence Victoria never forgot.

"Oh yes," said Loevio presently. "Oh yes, I did, you know. I meant to marry her, oh yes. A man—always does, you know; at least—er——"

But it was a lie, and he knew it—a lie, and Victoria felt it.

Yet, no; she struggled for him yet.

She was silent for a moment, and he began to breathe more freely. After all, he decided, women were pretty much alike everywhere. It all resolved itself into a question of management. He was quite sure of his own perspicacity by this time.

Already, moreover, the disagreeableness of the past minutes was fading away.

He drew closer to Victoria where she stood. She was looking down, and her face was pale. It showed in its lines strenuous thought. She was thinking, fighting—for him.

Loevio feasted his eyes—as he was never weary of feasting them—and his senses with the delights of her close presence.

"Victoria," he said softly, standing as he was a little behind her, and gazing at the cloudy waves of her hair, "don't let your mind dwell any longer on this. Trust me. It is enough for you to know that I am free, darling—*free* as air!"

She raised her head and looked upwards to him as he bent a little over her.

The backward glance of her eyes, the pose of her head thrown back against him, delighted him. He moved closer to her. He wanted to draw her head down on his breast. Victoria's steady gaze disconcerted him for a moment. And in that moment her attitude changed. She turned and faced him full, standing farther away from him, looking him squarely in the face with a resolute, tranquil, curious scrutiny.

"Free?" she repeated slowly. "*You*"——

Loevio's face flushed. A pang of uneasiness shot through him; yet her attitude, her words, and the tone of her voice, aroused in him another feeling, more of irritation than apprehension.

"Certainly," he responded decisively. "Free—as free as nine men out of ten."

The last sentence was a bit of bravado pure and simple. It was the outcome, or the impulse, of the mingled and opposing forces of fear and annoyance.

The woman, facing him, looked at him again. Her eyes glittered.

"Free?" she repeated again. "Do you mean to tell me that—she—the woman who was here—has—no claim on you?—no claim—which binds you?"

Loevio smiled.

"My dear," he said at once—and he spoke with more than his usual softness—"you are a woman of the world, and you are far too much a woman of your *own* world, and far too—er"—he laughed slightly—"far too modern not to be aware of the fact that many men—most men—regard themselves as free, and—women"—he laughed—"are willing to regard them as free also, when no *legal* bar to marriage stands in the way. As to other—er——"

Victoria blushed scarlet. Her heart contracted again with another wrench, but she was excessively angry. She drew herself to her full height, and her voice was choking, as she interrupted him quickly.

"How dare you!" she exclaimed. "Because I happen to write music, are you to—speak of—of—to—say such things to me?"

Loevio was perfectly disconcerted. Her anger

amazed him. Hang it all, he thought, new or old. women are confoundedly puzzling! The magnitude of his offence positively passed him by. But he began to be very much afraid of losing her.

"Pardon me!" he said quickly. "Forgive me, dearest! I am a brute, but the whole thing is hurting me. You don't realise how it is hurting me—how *nauseating* it is to me. Don't be hard, dearest Make allowances. The best of women—and you are the best of women—make allowances, large allowances, sometimes."

He smiled at her—a tender, pleading smile.

Victoria looked distraught.

"Oh!" she cried impulsively, "how can I make allowances—how can I, when I remember what I have heard, what I *know*? Oh!" She buried her face in her hands.

She raised her head again a second later.

"Have you no feeling for—her—that poor woman? Think what it is you intended to do! Think of how you planned to—destroy her! Have you no pity—that—not content with destroying her life you are willing to disgrace her—openly—in the eyes of her mother, her—relations? You can deliberately set yourself to do this, to shame her? Have you no pity for her? Can you not feel *sorry* for her?—or even for ——"

She stopped. The words had rushed on, spoken as they were out of a full heart. But—not even to do justice, not even to plead for pity, not even to appeal to the best instincts of human nature, could Victoria bring herself to speak to the man of his children.

There are things that *cannot* be said.

Involuntarily she averted her face. It was drawn. Her lips were white; her eyes were dark with emotion.

At once Loevio understood, and a swift flood of compassion rushed over him.

He tried hard to smile without embarrassment.

"Dear child," he said gently, "you are distressing yourself needlessly. Poor, dear little child, you are wasting your pity. Victoria—the—person—er—the—I—I have provided—*will* provide too for——" He stumbled horribly, and he felt his face getting crimson. "It's not fair to blame me," he cried sharply. "Oh, I daresay she didn't think it worth while to tell you of all the money she—they—have cost me. Upon my soul, I've paid dearly for ever seeing her face! Women never think of this. It's all very well to look at things from a sentimental standpoint, but hard facts can't be denied. I think if you were to put it to an impartial conclave of witnesses, you'd find I'd been as generous as most men. Of course" (with a sort of laugh) "I don't want to take any credit; only, when you upbraid me like this—a man must make some defence. A——"

He paused suddenly.

Victoria, her hands clasped behind her, was looking at him intently.

"Don't say any more," she exclaimed hurriedly. "Please, *please* don't. We are on different planes. Nothing can make matters better, nothing can change—the past. Nothing, either, I suppose, that *I* can say will influence you. I—I—am sorry!" Her voice broke suddenly; it *would* not be controlled any longer. "I *wanted* to—remember you as—as—to think well of you—in the future."

Loevio grew deadly white.

"What—what do you mean?" he said at once, "Why do you talk of the future like that?"

Her face flushed. Before she could speak he made a step towards her.

"Victoria," he said sharply, for his voice was strained in its intensity, "do you mean that you are going—to—let this—*really* make a difference between us—really come—between us? Victoria," —his voice sank to a hoarse whisper as he said it —"if you do anything like that you will kill me! You will, as surely as you live! Oh, you couldn't, you *couldn't* be so cruel! Oh, I would have sworn that *you* were above any petty feelings of that sort!"

Victoria stared at him. Something in the expression of her face infuriated him. He flung himself about the room in a wild accession of passion.

"Pshaw!" he cried furiously, with a short laugh of mad rage, "it's all the damnedest rot, this talk nowadays about men and women—the *damnedest* rot! Downright canting folly! As if men and women *could* be alike, *could* ever understand perfectly the special circumstances of each others' lives. *You* have filled your mind with this sort of *canting* humbug, this infernal——"

But in another second the swing of the pendulum carried the passionate, emotional temperament to the opposite point.

"My darling, my darling, forgive me! Ah, *you* will not be hard, *you* will not be unforgiving? Remember, I am yours, and yours *alone*. I never loved, never knew what love was, till I met you!"

Victoria, as he spoke, felt that she was sinking —down, down into an abyss of black mud. Without knowing it, she recoiled from him.

He made a frantic effort to calm himself. He pressed his lips together, and clenched his hands tightly, with a pitiful intensity that was pathetic.

"Victoria," he said again, and he tried hard to steady his voice, "you have my whole life in your hands. Dearest, I will do anything for you. You can make me what you will; only, don't send me away. I will wait, I will wait! I will *prove* how I love you! I will do anything. everything——"

His voice gave way altogether.

Victoria looked haggard.

"Oh," she ejaculated faintly, "*can* you think, can you actually suppose that *I*, *knowing* this, would——"

She turned away.

Loevio stamped his foot.

"Why not?" he cried angrily. "I am a *free* man! Pah! you are not a child! You know, as well as I do, that I am no more tied than any other man! You haven't lived to this day of your life among the men of your own—*set*—not to know what men are."

Victoria felt cold from head to foot.

She had rejected Jerry Annesley for this man!

The idiot fatuity of her own exceeding wisdom twisted her lips into a travesty of a smile.

"I can tell you," Loevio continued, with a little, sneering note in his voice, "if you marry any man of your acquaintance, perhaps you'll find he will

scarcely pay his wife such honour as *I* shall pay mine. Victoria, I will devote my life to my wife! I swear it before God! There is no man in England, not one of your *swells*, I assure you, who would honour his *wife* more perfectly than I shall!"

He paused to take breath. He was genuinely pleased with the speech. He watched its effect with delighted anticipation.

Victoria raised her eyes with an effort.

"You have one wife before God and heaven," she said coldly. "If you mean what you say, honour *her*!"

Loevio smiled slightly.

"That is very generous of you," he said warmly, "and very womanly, sweetly womanly! But you ask an impossibility. You want me to ruin my life because many years ago, when I was younger, and in every way inferior to what I am now, I took pity on a girl who was tied to a brute, and released her. She was jolly willing to be released, I assure you. Well, she's had a very good time—a much better time than I've had—and I'm not going to be sacrificed now. I've made my life and my career what it is. No one knows better than you do what it means to make a career such as mine. Well, never mind; I've *made* it. And *now*, to hang a millstone round my neck in the shape of a second-rate wife and——"

He stammered and reddened.

"I—I—mean," he continued hastily, "that now I am entitled, fairly entitled, to a very different sort of—person—for my wife. It's a different rung of the ladder, in fact, altogether. I'm willing to do all that's fair. I promise you I'll provide handsomely

—*handsomely* for—for them all. It's no joke to promise this; for although I've been exceptionally lucky, still, artists are seldom millionaires. And besides"—he smiled softly—"I shall think everything I have too little for—for the future."

Victoria was silent. He could not see her eyes; he wished he could. But he began afresh,—

"Therefore you see what injustice you are doing me by the view you are taking so persistently.'

Victoria turned to him.

"Injustice!" she said coldly, and she paused. "Tell me," she said entreatingly, an instant later, "tell me why you did not marry—that woman? You have said that at first you intended to marry her. Why did you not do so? She was not a bad, wicked woman, was she?"

There was a little silence. Victoria kept her eyes fixed on his face.

Loevio looked down at the floor and shuffled his feet.

Victoria waited.

He looked up presently, with an effort, and he laughed: but the laugh jarred on Victoria.

He raised his eyebrows.

"Well," he said at last, "that's just it. I suppose you can't understand, and I don't want to be too hard on any one; but when a man finds a woman willing to—er—to leave her husband, or to—that's what women *can't* understand, *won't* understand, that—after—anything of the—sort—a man *doesn't* want to *marry* the—the woman, you see—er. So, if you ask if this woman was a bad or wicked woman—oh, well,"—he shrugged his shoulders—"we won't go into *that*. She was bad enough to——"

Victoria lifted her eyes once more to his face. She gave him one long, questioning, heart-broken look. He was conscious of his unwearied admiration for the dark intensity of her eyes, the mingled firmness and delicacy of her mouth.

"I am going to ask you to do me one favour," she said, in accents which betrayed the hopelessness of her thoughts. "I shall never ask you another."

"You shall ask me hundreds," he interposed gracefully.

She took no notice of the interruption.

"I ask you to—go—*now*, without trying to—say anything more."

Loevio turned white.

"Ah, no," he cried impulsively, and there was real anguish in it, "ah no, no, anything but that! Not, at least, until you promise to forgive me!"

He paused, and smiled haggardly.

"Very well," he said again. "Yes, I will go, *now*, of course, as you wish it; but—to-morrow——"

Victoria looked at him steadily once more.

"No," she said, in a clear, low voice, "no, not to-morrow, or—ever."

The man stood still. A little breeze which had sprung up came in freshly through the open windows, and blew the blended sweetness of the roses across his face.

Victoria turned away and walked to the open window. She felt stifled, as if she wanted air.

Loevio watched her stupidly.

"I will go,"—he said hoarsely, rousing himself with an effort, "I will go,—certainly,—as you wish it. But—to-morrow. You will see it all—differently—to-morrow."

He smiled hopefully.

"I don't blame you, dearest," he added, coming to her side. "After all, you see, women *are* jealous mortals. I am flattered, really."

Victoria never moved.

"Well—to-morrow." He paused. A grey shade stole over the whiteness of his face. "Victoria"—the word was only a whisper, but it sounded as if the speaker were wrestling with some force that was strangling his utterance—"to—to-morrow!"

But she did not turn—not a hair's breadth.

Loevio straightened his shoulders with a gesture which the admirers of Loevio the actor knew well. He forced his lips to smile again—to smile, to smile! He wrung that smile from the farthest stores of his self-control.

"To-morrow——"

He left the room with the word and the smile on his lips.

* * * * *

Victoria leaned against the wood of the window. The sunshine and the breeze played on her face, which was white and set.

"My God!" she murmured. "And I *wanted* to be that man's wife!"

William the Conqueror sat up and combed his tail—or did in his estimation what was equivalent to combing his tail. He did it with the care a well-bred gentleman bestows upon his person. Just awake from his afternoon siesta, and perched on the topmost cushion of the sofa, he found the sunshine and the breeze eminently gratifying. He paused once in his proceedings to look at his mistress. She was

standing very motionless by the window. William the Conqueror resumed operations on a fresh bit of his tail. When that was finished he again looked at his mistress. She had not stirred. William the Conqueror sat erect on the silken cushion, and purred gently. His beautifully combed tail was folded with flawless exactitude and neatness round his forepaws. He looked handsome and serene. He had arrived at a period of life when inordinate expectations cease to agitate, and trivial gratifications are sufficient to satisfy. The pathetic obliquity of man's mind looks upon this period of life with—pity.

Suddenly, in the street below, a piano-organ burst into a roulade of melody. Vigorously it worked away on its level plane of noise till a sound within the room rose above it.

William the Conqueror opened his half-shut eyes. His mistress's head lay prone on the window-sill; his mistress was sobbing her heart out in hot, heart-rending tears.

The piano-organ in the street outside was triumphantly playing "Sappho's Song," double-forte all the way through.

Some one below, in the house, threw the piano-organist a trifling coin. At the same moment a bell—the first dressing-bell—rang out through the house, sharply reverberant. William the Conqueror cocked his ear. *Dinner* instantly became reflected in the corner of William the Conqueror's right eye. Dinner!

He glanced again at his mistress. The piano-organist, doubtless in grateful recognition of unwonted largesse, was now turning the handle of his machine with perfectly frenzied zeal. "Sappho's Song" rang

louder and louder, in an absolute stampede of resonant, mechanical melody.

Victoria lifted her head. The reverberating echoes of the first dressing-bell were dying into silence. She turned away from the window. Her eyes—now—were dry, quite dry. There were no tears in them—no tears, *now*, even in her heart. Her face was composed, but it was white, white with the pallor of the heart, and something had gone out of it—for ever. Victoria advanced into the room. A cushion had fallen off the sofa. She lifted it carefully, and restored it to its place. Her room looked untidy; its disarrangement offended her sense of order and neatness. She moved about, the evening sunshine playing on her dark, well-poised head, and on her slight figure, in its pale, graceful mauve draperies, putting this thing and that to rights—a book or two, some scattered newspapers on one of the little tables. She set each in order.

The piano stood open. On it, lying where she—no doubt—had carelessly flung it aside, was the full score of her own opera. Taking it up, she smoothed out the rumpled pages carefully, and, closing the book, thrust it under her arm, and held it there, closely pressed against her side.

She shut the piano firmly. There, everything was in order now.

The piano-organ below was nearly played out. In another moment it would go away to play for somebody else.

Victoria walked out of the room, the book of her opera still held closely against her side, just under her heart. Everything was in order once more, and she

went to dress for dinner. The very ordinary routine knew no interruption. So—we are here to buy experience and—to pay for it. Meanwhile, the recurrent minutiæ of Life goes beautifully on. The trivially important, the importantly trivial, claim us for their own at all points.

THE END.

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